

1 Timothy 4:3-5 in the Navajo Bible

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Éí, Iigeh dooda, daaní índa, Ch'iyáán ła' doo jiyáa da, ałdó' daaní. Nidi da'oodlání t'áa aaníinii bił béeedahózinii éí ch'iyáán yaa ahééh danízingo deiyáa dooleełgo Diyin God bá áyiilaa. ⁴ Diyin God ádayiilaii t'áa ałtso yá'adaat'ééh. Áko baa ahééh hasingo daadánígú doo ła' nahji' kódoolníł da, ⁵ háálá Diyin God bizaad bee índa sohodizinígú bee diyingo ádaalne'. (1 Timothy 4:3-5) ¹

They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. ⁴ For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. (1 Timothy 4:3-5) ²

Introduction

There are a number of points to notice in this passage. The people Paul describes abstain from certain foods and also from marriage. This means his readers were not Jewish, and were probably not pagan either. They appear to have been Gnostics. Gnosticism thrived alongside Christianity, as a kind of parallel Christianity, for the first 200 years or so after Christ. We'll come back to that later in the paper. Paul says the foods these people abstained from were created by God to be used as food and to be received with thanksgiving. This is an important bit of contextual information, because in fact not all animals fall in that category. God repeatedly makes clear in the Old Testament that not all animals are to be viewed as food.

Verse 3 is very nearly the same in English and Navajo, with the exception that in English there is a closer connection between the two clauses. NIV separates them with a comma, while the Navajo translation separates them with a period. The sense of the second clause in Navajo is, "But God made [this] food to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth." Not, "the food which God made to be received . . . ," but, "God made [this] food to be received" As we shall see below, this difference in emphasis might be greater than it first appears.

Verse 4 could be taken badly out of context. "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving" (vs. 4). If we want to set context aside and make this an absolute statement, then we should consider what that statement would imply. Everything God created is good. What did God create? He created everything there is (see John 1:3). And so spiders, slugs, dirt – everything – can be eaten and should not be rejected. This goes beyond Paul's intent, but his words could be twisted to include such things.

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

² English Bible quotations are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

We have measured Paul's statement against common sense. Let us also measure it against Scripture – the rulings of the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, for example, which Paul appears to have supported (see Acts 16:4-5). According to Acts 15, the meat of animals offered to idols, strangled, and/or still containing blood was not to be received as food, without or without thanksgiving. We can't offer thanks for something God has forbidden and expect Him to bless it.

Verse 5 makes another statement that could be taken out of context. Prayer consecrates everything. Everything? Adultery, for example? Of course not! Paul is talking about food. Adultery is not food, so introducing that topic would go beyond the context. Are there any other things that would go beyond his context? There might be.

"Everything is permissible for me"- but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"- but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Corinthians 6:12)

Like every other Bible writer, Paul had something in mind as he wrote. We could wish he had told us more about this by way of background, but he does leave some clues. In any event, there are things we can know at the outset by studying other passages. A good deal of Scripture is devoted to telling us we can't eat just anything and everything. The fall of Adam and Eve involved this very question (i.e., the question of whether or not there were legitimate restrictions on what people should eat), and it has been an issue ever since. Is Paul flying in the face of all previous revelation when he says, "nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving" (vs. 4, above). Let us be careful how we answer, because in another passage we also read, "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn" (Isaiah 8:20). If Paul really does reject earlier Scripture, we in turn would have to reject Paul.

I assume here that Paul was not rejecting earlier Scripture. There is only one Holy Spirit and He is not opposed to Himself, saying things that are contradictory on different occasions. We must see the unity in Scripture, or we're not seeing what the Holy Spirit put there. So what did Paul mean? Our answer to this question will depend on our concept of what position he was arguing against. He was countering someone else's argument in the verses we're studying. Learning what that was will shape our understanding of what Paul himself meant. For now, consider some things he did not mean.

Thinking Is Good for You

Paul is addressing a spiritual issue in the passage before us, and the principle he lays down is important, but it was a spiritual principle and it rests on an assumption. The assumption is that all food is equally healthful. If we offer thanks, that's what matters. And that's true. If we come to the same subject matter from a physical perspective, however, there are some further distinctions to make. Below we discuss (a) poisonous plants, (b) food allergies, (c) public health issues related to eating, and (d) other things that can affect our health individually, whether they affect anyone else's or not.

Poisonous plants

If we offer thanks over a plate of Death Camas (*Zigadenus* spp.), it will still kill us.³ The reason for this is that it's poisonous. Paul says "everything," and yet we need to be careful how we apply the term. He was not talking about poisonous plants. Things like Death Camas, poisonous mushrooms, and salads made of poison ivy fall outside the scope of the discussion.⁴ And that's my point. Some things fall outside the scope of what Paul was discussing.

Most of the thousands of different kinds of mushrooms are edible. Only 32 are potentially fatal to humans, while another 52 are dangerously toxic.⁵ (Some are hallucinogenic instead of toxic.) Unfortunately, some edible mushrooms have poisonous look-alikes. The poisonous *Amanita* looks similar to the edible puffball, especially before it reaches maturity. The brightly colored (and poisonous) Jack-O-Lantern mushroom is almost indistinguishable from the equally bright (and edible) Chanterelle. Nothing in the appearance of mushrooms provides reliable information about which ones are harmful to humans and which are safe. Some poisonous varieties are brightly colored, some have pointed tops, some can be detoxified by cooking – but not all. There is no safe rule. People have died because of relying on some handy rule of thumb about which mushrooms are safe and which are not. In any event, Paul was not talking about mushrooms.

Nor was he talking about plants like poison ivy, poison oak, or poison sumac. One problem with eating poison ivy is that to eat it you first have to touch it, and touching poison ivy is not something you want to do. The sap from its leaves, stems, and roots is extremely irritating to the skin. One good thing about these plants is that they don't grow on the reservation.

We've talked about things that are universally poisonous. An *Amanita* mushroom doesn't care who you are. It's an equal opportunity killer. Similarly, although it will not kill you, and although not everyone is affected by it in exactly the same way, poison ivy and other similar plants are irritating to just about everyone who touches them. (I should mention that another thing you don't want to do with poison ivy is burn it. The fumes can carry the toxin into your lungs where it's guaranteed to be *really* irritating.⁶) In any event, no one thinks of poison ivy as food, and this fact helps illustrate the more general point that in fact some things are best left alone. When Paul says, "everything is good" (vs. 4), he's not talking about poison ivy.

Food allergies

There is another class of plants that make perfectly good food for almost everyone. I say "almost" because a large majority of people can benefit from and enjoy them, but others can't. A good example would be peanuts. There are few products of nature as nourishing as the peanut. George Washington Carver (born to slave parents in Missouri before the Civil War) was a great American and a great scientist. Carver had a list of 105 recipes to show people how they could

³ If we knowingly eat what we know is poisonous, for no reason, that's not faith. It's presumption. Under these circumstances, forget about invoking Mark 16:17-18 for divine protection. Why didn't Jesus jump from the top of the temple when Satan urged Him to do so in Matthew 4:6? Whatever you feel His reason was, that's the reason why we shouldn't eat things that we know are poisonous.

⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_poisonous_plants.

⁵ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mushroom_poisoning.

⁶ See <http://alternative-medicine-and-health.com/conditions/poisonivy.htm>.

use peanuts for food and another list of 100 things that can be made from peanuts, which no one would want to eat (cosmetics, dyes, paints, plastics, gasoline, nitroglycerin, and so on).⁷

Peanuts are useful and nourishing, but some people are strongly allergic to them. I'm not just talking here about a potential for discomfort. "The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America estimates that peanut allergy is the most common cause of food-related death."⁸ Peanuts are a very serious health hazard for people with this allergy. That's one example. There are many other types of food allergies as well.

Although an individual could be allergic to any food, such as fruits, vegetables, and meats, there are eight foods that account for 90% of all food-allergic reactions. These are: milk, egg, peanut, tree nut (walnut, cashew, etc.), fish, shellfish, soy, and wheat.⁹

I know I'm not allergic to milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, or wheat (and plan to pass the rest of my life without ever learning whether I'm allergic to shellfish). For most people, milk and eggs, peanuts and tree nuts, soy and wheat are perfectly good food, but for those with the appropriate allergies these things could cause sickness or death. In 2 Timothy Paul was not suggesting we ignore any food allergies we might have.

Public health concerns

Obesity. The University of Michigan, in a recent study, concluded that smoking, drug abuse, and obesity are the three biggest public health concerns by our nation's kids.¹⁰ While we don't normally eat cigarettes, marijuana, or who knows what other drugs people are experimenting with now, a lot of people do eat things that make them overweight. This would include foods with excessive amounts of fat and excessive amounts of sugar.

A good place to look for fat is in anything that has been fried. Unfortunately fried bread is a traditional and prominent part of the Navajo diet. And it's delicious! But for people who have a weight problem, maybe this shouldn't be the main thing in their diet. With regard to sugar, I could talk about soda pop, which is pretty much all sugar, but candy, pastries, and popular breakfast cereals are also loaded with sugar.

Sugar affects more than your kids' weight. It also affects their behavior. According to one doctor, when sugar levels rise they don't stay high for long, but fall, and when they fall there is a tendency for the body to compensate for the loss of sugar by releasing adrenaline. Think about the task you have controlling your children already and then reflect on what adrenaline does to them. Adrenaline is a substance, manufactured within our bodies. Its purpose is to give us the ability to respond quickly to danger. If we're walking along and we see a bear, suddenly we aren't tired any more (if we were when we saw it). We run somewhere, or climb something, or jump over things that would not have been possible otherwise, because our bodies have given us a sudden rush of adrenaline. Do you really want to set your child up for sugar lows and adrenaline highs like this? As a parent, it is not to your advantage to do this.

⁷ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington_Carver.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peanut_allergy.

⁹ <http://www.foodallergy.org/allergens/index.html>.

¹⁰ See <http://www.med.umich.edu/opm/newspage/2007/poll2.htm>.

A recent study supports the idea that a breakfast with a lower sugar load may improve short-term memory and attention span at school (*Physiol Behav*, 2007; 92: 717-24). Giving your child a breakfast which contains fiber (oatmeal, shredded wheat, berries, bananas, whole-grain pancakes, etc.) instead of loads of refined sugar should keep adrenaline levels more constant and make the school day a more wondrous and productive experience. Packing her/his lunch box with delicious fiber-containing treats (whole-grain breads, peaches, grapes, a myriad of other fresh fruits, etc.) may turn afternoons at home into a delight.¹¹

Diabetes. There's one other thing we should mention in connection with letting sugar levels get out of control, and this is diabetes. Along with alcoholism, diabetes is one of the worst scourges to be found on any Indian reservation. Diabetes develops when people have too many carbohydrates, too much fat, or much sugar in the diet – not just once or twice, but over an extended period of time. Native peoples have a special weakness for diabetes. So if we say, "but God made potatoes," and load up on fries at the local hamburger stand and then wash them down with a couple of sodas, that's not helpful. If you're going to eat fries I suppose you should offer thanks for them, but it would be better to leave them alone.

Having diabetes doesn't mean that you have to start eating special foods or follow a complicated diabetes diet plan. For most people, a diabetes diet simply translates into eating a variety of foods in moderate amounts and sticking to regular mealtimes.

This means choosing a diet that emphasizes vegetables, fruits and whole grains. Consistency also is key, because your body responds to excess calories and fat by creating an undesirable rise in blood sugar. Rather than a restrictive diet, a diabetes diet is a healthy-eating plan that's naturally rich in nutrients and low in fat and calories. In fact, it's the best eating plan for everyone.¹²

So not only is it a good idea to eat a variety of the right foods, but to eat them at the right times, and in general to follow a moderate and consistent lifestyle. I think it would be a mistake to put Paul forward as someone who opposes this type of common sense approach to eating. The reason for eating in the first place is to maintain your strength and be healthy. You can't serve God with your all your strength (see Deuteronomy 6:5) if you don't have any. And you can't serve Him with your whole mind if you don't think about what you do. If you see that your eating is destroying your health instead of sustaining it, stop eating that way. Think! God made our bodies and He wants them to be strong and healthy. So do what leads to that result.

Personal well being

The main difference between public health and personal health is how many people are affected. If it's lots of people, that's public health. If it's one person, that's personal health. But either way, some things are likely to help more than others. In my case, I love pineapple, but can't eat it. The acid makes my teeth hurt. (Pineapple doesn't bother most people.) So I can have painful teeth or I can use my head and avoid eating what I know causes the problem. When I do this, am I denying the freedom of the gospel? No, in Christ I'm perfectly free to eat pineapple, but my mind tells me it would be better not to. An approach to eating that allows the

¹¹ http://www.drgreene.com/21_496.html.

¹² <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/diabetes-diet/DA00027>.

mind to govern our choices, exercising restraint in certain areas, is not opposed to the gospel nor does it deny any part of what Paul is saying in the passage we're studying.

Discussion

We've talked about four areas in which it makes sense to think carefully about what we eat. Poisonous foods are harmful to everyone, food allergies affect only some people. In the one case, we could say that "poisonous" means everyone is allergic to it, and in the other, that allergic reactions involve things that are poisonous to certain people only. The main difference between poisons and allergies, then, is how many people are affected by them. In the case of public as opposed to personal health, it's public if a broad cross-section of society has the same health problem. If it's just you, that's personal. But if enough individuals have the same personal health issues, it can be studied as a matter of public health. In all of this there is an underlying fact that runs like a thread through the discussion: What we eat affects our health. This is not bad; it's good. You want your food to affect your health – positively. The problem is that some foods affect our health negatively.

Eating Can Be Bad for You

In my view Paul was talking about Gnostics when he said, "They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods" (1 Timothy 4:3-5). What do Gnostics teach about food? I say "teach" rather than "taught" because there are still Gnostics. So if we want to know what they believe, we can ask them. Those interested in the topic should read the Wikipedia article on Gnosticism.¹³ As regards food, Gnostics have a tendency to be vegetarians. So the thrust of Paul's argument was that Christians need not be vegetarian, but are free to eat both vegetables and meat. This is what he meant by "everything" in vs. 4. Gnostics had mystic reasons for their position and Paul answered their mysticism with Christian spirituality. The bottom line is that there's nothing unchristian about eating meat.

I am a Christian, not a Gnostic, but I believe there are reasons – not mystic reasons, but physical reasons – why it's a good idea to avoid eating meat today. I say "today," because this has not always been the case. Things have changed. Do I forbid my fellow Christians to eat meat? Not at all. You are free to do that. Scripture does command us not to eat certain kinds of meat, but Paul was right when he said we can eat "everything" – not only vegetables, but vegetables plus meat. Does this mean the Christian *must* eat everything? That is not what Paul says. If we're free to eat, we're also free to abstain. If being free in this context means we're under obligation to eat meat, then that's not freedom any more, but coercion.

Incidentally, my wife and I have been together for thirty years now. Our daughter and her husband are expecting their first child in a few months. So please don't think that I forbid marriage or confuse my position with the one Paul argues against in 1 Timothy 4:3-5. I don't forbid eating meat, either. I don't eat it myself, but I don't others to eat it if that's something they want to do. Having said this, let me share some of the reason for my own decisions in regard to eating flesh foods.

¹³ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnosticism>.

Modern diseases

Alzheimers. In their book, *Dying for a Hamburger: Modern Meat Processing and the Epidemic of Alzheimer's Disease*,¹⁴ Murray Waldman and Marjorie Lamb argue that the conditions under which animals are slaughtered and process for our tables at the present day is a possible cause of prion diseases such as Alzheimers.

Alzheimer's disease is the fourth leading cause of death among older Americans, but its cause remains a mystery. Waldman, coroner for the city of Toronto, and Lamb (*Two Minutes a Day for a Greener Planet*) argue that Alzheimer's is a new disease and not, as many believe, one that has simply become more widespread as people live longer. The authors assert that, like mad cow disease, it's caused by infectious agents called prions; the protein plaques in the brain of Alzheimer's patients, they argue, resemble those in the brains of people with prion diseases. (Stanley Prusiner, the Nobelist who discovered prions, speculated 20 years ago that Alzheimer's might be a prion disease.) Waldman and Lamb believe the increased incidence of Alzheimer's is due to mass consumption, and the resulting mass production, of meat over the last century, which would explain its rarity in places like India. Scientists have shown that prion diseases can be transmitted between species (e.g., from cows to humans), and that high temperature doesn't kill prions. This isn't a jeremiad against eating meat. Waldman and Lamb lay out their case in a measured fashion that many will find convincing and disturbing.¹⁵

Cholesterol and heart disease. When I was younger I once agreed to paint a lady's kitchen, but when I got to the part close to the stove where she prepared her food I couldn't complete the job. There was a quarter inch of grease oozing down the wall by the stove from all the meat she had cooked. That was the part she didn't eat. There was much more that she did eat. I don't know what her blood vessels looked like after years of eating this way, but I'm sure that eventually her doctor had occasion to take a look. She was not healthy, and how could she be? The fat that people eat doesn't only make their middles big, but fills their blood vessels and makes it impossible for the heart to do its job. Then, we pick up the newspaper and read about the heart attack they had, and wonder to ourselves how that could be.

Parasites. I've been talking about meats that God has given us as food. There are some types of meat that He has not given us. These are not to be eaten and can be dangerous. I'm talking here especially about pork. There's no such thing as a pig without a parasite. The reason for this has to with the way pigs eat. They eat off the bottom of their pens, which are always filthy. Some of this filth gets recycled back through the pig and the result is that parasites thrive in such environments. The animals that God told us not to eat (such as pigs) are generally scavengers. Buzzards among birds, crabs among sea creatures, pigs among land animals – all of these have similar eating habits. Notice that the animals God gave mankind for food are all vegetarians (deer, sheep, goats).¹⁶ The birds He gave us are also vegetarians (chickens, ducks, geese).

¹⁴ New York: St Martin's Press, 2005.

¹⁵ The above quotation is from a book review appearing in Publishers Weekly. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

¹⁶ Some that He did not allow were also vegetarian (rabbits).

God's instruction about what to eat and what to leave aside are laid down in Leviticus 11. You might not like these laws, but one thing you can be sure of is that if you don't follow them they will not benefit you. On the other hand, if you do follow them, I submit that they *will* benefit you. Don't be so obsessed with the idea of freedom that you set yourself free from instruction that could help you live a healthier, happier life. In saying what He did God knew what He was talking about. And He loves us.

Conditions in the past

When there were fewer people on planet Earth, animals used as food could pretty much run wild. When Esau wanted meat for his father he "left for the open country" (Genesis 27:5) and hunted it. The animal he eventually killed was undoubtedly healthy, and so the chances that it would make the person who ate it healthy were pretty good. Even when people kept flocks of sheep (as Jacob did), they weren't kept in a cramped feed lot. Remember the passage that says, "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night" (Luke 2:8)? "Out in the fields." That's where animals should be. These shepherds and their sheep were surrounded by green grass and had access to clean water. If someone ate one of the sheep for Passover, no problem.

When you buy meat in a store now, however, chances are that the animal lived under inhumane conditions, was shipped without adequate food, water, or fresh air, and was then run through a meat processing plant under the most brutal of conditions. There are two things to think about here. One is whether the animal is being treated humanely. The other is whether it can stay healthy and well under such conditions. If it's not healthy when you eat it, how is it going to make you healthy? So that's one set of issues.

Conditions in heaven

Another thing for the Christian to think about is what life will be like in heaven. When Isaiah tells us, "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9), what does that mean? When we get to heaven, will someone go off behind the tree of life and kill one of the beautiful animals so s/he can eat just one last hamburger? When the Israelites were in the desert, some of them wanted to go back to Egypt where they could have all the meat they wanted. When we get to heaven, are we going to look back wistfully and think about how good things were back on planet Earth, when we could still do everything we wanted? John says,

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:4)

What does this mean? Is John saying that people won't die in the New Earth, but that animals will? No, he says, "There will be no more death." Anyone expecting to go to heaven and start killing things upon arrival is in for a rude surprise. That's what we left behind. It's not the way they do things there. This is one reason why the New Earth is new and why it will be so different from our present world – as different as, well, as different as life and death.

Discussion

In the beginning Scripture tells us that Adam and Eve were allowed to eat only certain things. They were not to eat from one particular tree. And apart from that, in Genesis 1:29 they were only given "every seed bearing plant" for food. That's fruits, nuts, and grains. In Genesis 3:18, after they had sinned, God tells Adam and Eve, "you shall eat the plants of the field." Their diet now included vegetables, along with the fruits, nuts, and grains they had before. After the flood God says,

"Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything." (Genesis 9:3)

And yet, notice that the animals which entered Noah's ark entered by twos if unclean, and by sevens if clean. So even in giving Noah and those with him "everything," what God provided was predominantly clean animals, showing that the distinction was already in place at this early time in history. At the same time God imposed the following restriction: "But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it" (Genesis 9:4). Notice that this rule begins before Moses and continues on through the New Testament. At the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 there were four rulings, three of which had to do with food. Here's what they decided:

. . . we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. (Acts 15:20)

"And from blood." This is an intriguing statement. I have never heard of a Christian who follows this rule, but it is given in the New Testament. There's a name for the practice of avoiding blood. The word is "kosher." We think of this as a strictly Jewish thing, but in Acts the kosher law is imposed on Christians, and more specifically on Gentile Christians (see vs. 19). It still applies.

Conclusion

Christians are free to eat meat, just as they are free to marry. My reasons for not eating meat have to do with conditions that did not exist during Bible times. Things have changed over the last 2000 years. If I were living when Paul lived, I would eat what he ate. If he were living now, I think he would eat what I eat – not out of compulsion, but for the reasons I have outlined.

Some things never were good for food, and Paul does not deny this, but of the foods "that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth" (1 Tim 4:3), we are still free to eat them today. However, being free to eat is not the same as being under obligation to eat. So personally I see no conflict between believing everything Paul said and yet not eating everything he ate. Conditions in our world are different from what they were 2000 years ago. There is one other reason for taking this position, which I will discuss in a later paper.