

Romans 14:14 in the Navajo Bible

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Bóhólníihii Jesus binahjí' doo shił naaki nilííggóó díí shił bééhoozin, t'áá áłtso yá'ádaah't'éeh nidi doo yá'ádaat'éeh da jinízinígíí éí t'áá ádíghahahígo doo hoł yá'át'éeh da. (Romans 14:14)¹

As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. (Romans 14:14)²

Introduction

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. ¹⁶ He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

The Greek word *koinos* means "common" or, in this context, "unclean." This shade of meaning does not come through in the Navajo. Navajo *doo hoł yá'át'éeh da* simply means "to one it is not good," or simply, "one doesn't like it." In the Bible the word "unclean" has ceremonial connotations. Paul might have had Mosaic law in mind, with its ceremonial associations, but more is involved. So the Navajo wording, with its neutral connotations, might be appropriate after all.

What Paul Did Not Mean

Paul's context for saying *t'áá áłtso yá'ádaah't'éeh* ("everything is good") was food, so this means now we can eat pork. Or does it? Well sure, because if you think something is good, it is. Paul says so, or at least it appears that he does. His words could be taken that way, but what does he mean? We'll come to that next. For now let's talk about what he doesn't mean.

Are there ways to miss Paul's actual intent? Are there ways to misunderstand what he says? I think there are. Let me try to illustrate. If someone thinks tree bark and fence posts are good food, then they are. No one should consider them unclean. No passage of Scripture tells us not to eat such things, and even if it did, we're using Paul to set Scripture aside – i.e., Old Testament Scripture.

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 could apply the above principle to plants. Some plants are poisonous. But "if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean." If you don't regard something as unclean, it isn't. So a plant is only poisonous if you think it is. Is this what Paul means? Not for a moment. Poison doesn't care what we think. It's going to have the same effect whether we know what that effect might be or not. Food chemistry is not a matter of opinion. So food chemistry is not what Paul's is talking about.

What about pigs? With all due respect to those who like pork, there is no such thing as a pig without a parasite. All pigs have worms and other living things inside their bodies that you don't want in your body. God doesn't want them in your body either. That's why He told people in Old Testament times not to eat them. It was not simply a matter of ceremonial uncleanness. There were medical reasons for what God said and those reasons have not changed over time.

Pigs get parasites from their environment, which involves eating off the bottom of a pig pen. What is on the bottom of a pig pen? I don't need to spell this out, but some of whatever is there gets inside the pig every time it eats. Unfortunately, some of what goes into their bodies got there by coming out of their bodies, and in this way the animal's own waste gets recycled and goes not only through the pig but through anyone who eats it.

One Canadian study (financed by The Canada-Alberta Hog Industry Development Fund)³ asserts that giardia, cryptosporidium, toxoplasma, sacrocystis, blastocystis, taenia (tapeworm), trichinella spiralis (a parasite that lodges in muscle tissue), and ascaris lumbricoides (large roundworm) are really not a significant problem for people eating pork. The authors state, "In conclusion, throughout Canada, pigs, pork products and waste generated by pork production have a minimal to no risk of transmitting parasitic diseases to humans."⁴

I'm sure these same investigators would agree that threadworms, whipworms, nodular worms, red stomach worms, lungworms, kidneyworms, and coccidia, which often enter pigs through their own or other animals' feces,⁵ are no more of a problem for people who eat pork than the parasites mentioned in their report. I hope they enjoy eating my share. It might be tasty, but I will not be needing it.

What Paul Did Mean

In vs. 2 Paul says, "One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables." In vs. 6 he says, "He who eats meat, does so to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God." Both verses leave a question open, but it is a different question. In the one case, some eat "everything." What is "everything"? In the other case, a person "abstains." From what?

³ <http://www.banffpork.ca/proc/2000pdf/Chap13-Olson.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵ <http://extension.missouri.edu/xplor/agguides/ansci/q02430.htm>.

The question in both cases is whether or not to eat meat, i.e., whether or not to be a vegetarian. When Paul says "everything" in vs. 2, he's talking about vegetables and "meat" (vs. 6). And when someone "abstains" in vs. 6, they eat "only vegetables" (vs. 2). So that's the context – vegetables and "meat" or "only vegetables." There's no question about what kind of meat to eat. Why didn't that question arise? Because Paul's readers already knew the answer. Where did they find it? The Old Testament. We say the whole Bible is inspired by God, but it's easy to set aside the parts that give us the instruction we need most. People have always done this. Nothing changes.

We would like to use what Paul says to answer the question, What kinds of meat can we eat? This assumes we will be eating meat and the question is what kind. Then we come to the verse where Paul says "everything" and we take him to mean pork. That's not the context! Instead what Paul assumes is that people already know what kind of meats are good for food and he's taking the question in an entirely different direction – whether to eat meat at all. Some of his readers didn't. They ate "only vegetables" (vs. 6). He's entertaining the possibility of a stricter standard (only vegetables), not one that is more lenient (every kind of meat we can imagine).

While we're talking about stricter standards, notice in passing that Acts 15 lays down four rules for Gentile converts. The last of these was not to eat blood. How can you possibly avoid eating blood when you're eating meat? Meat is filled with blood. You can avoid eating the blood by draining it out first. There's a special term for this kind of food preparation. It's called "kosher." But I thought kosher was only for Jews! It's not only for Jews. It's in Acts 15, where the question was what Gentile converts should do. Who are Gentiles? We are. If you aren't a Jew, you're a Gentile.

So is it really true that "no food is unclean in itself"? In the way Paul meant it, yes, it's really true. That statement was inspired by the Holy Spirit and it's true. But it's a true statement that could be badly misunderstood. Your child throws his oatmeal on the floor. When this happens you remember that Paul said, "no food is unclean in itself," so you scoop it up off the floor, put it back in the bowl, and . . . No! You don't do any such thing! Because that's not any part of what Paul was saying. He wasn't saying pork is OK now either. According to Peter, people who twist Paul's words do so "to their own destruction" (2 Pet 3:16). Don't make Paul say what he never meant.

Discussion

People in Bible times knew nothing whatever about food chemistry. God did. That's why He made the rules He did. But the people did not. So God didn't require them to understand why He said animals used for food should have a divided hoof and chew their cud. (Here we have animals like cows, deer, and sheep – not pigs.) He didn't require them to understand why He said food from the sea or from lakes and streams should have both fins and scales. (Here we're talking about fish like salmon, trout, and tuna – not clams, or crabs, or snails.) All He required was for His people to do these things. The rules were simple and following them was enough to receive the benefit.

We can still benefit today by following these same rules. They are just as wise and helpful now as when they were given long ago. Christ did not die on the cross to change pigs. He died to change people. Pigs were filthy before the cross and they are

filthy now. No one should be eating such things – not only because God has expressed Himself and there's a rule, but because today we *do* understand food chemistry. Today we *do* know about animal parasites. Tape worms and trychinella are not good for you. God doesn't want such things in your body. There is a wealth of scientific information confirming what God told His people anciently that will help us avoid such problems. People who avoid eating animals heavily infested with parasites will be better off than those who do. They will be healthier. And we would be healthier still if we were to abstain from eating flesh, fish, and fowl altogether – not because our faith is weak, but because our understanding is strong.

There's a reason why God talked about divided hooves and the chewing of cud. There's a reason why He talked about fins and scales. And there's a reason why, in a perfect world, He gave our first parents only fruits, nuts, and grains as food. Even vegetables were not part of the original diet. They were added later. Now we can understand much of God's reasoning, but the main reason why He told us such inconvenient things in the first place is because He loves us – not to mention loving the animals He made. Why should He want our animals to suffer unnecessarily? He made them too. And why should He want us to suffer unnecessarily under a burden of disease, when with a little thought – and restraint – we could be healthy and strong? When God's people are sick it doesn't reflect well on the way He's been blessing them, so the things that keep us well have the added effect of bringing Him honor and praise as well.

Conclusion

In our day and time there is a wealth of knowledge about foods and nutrition, and it's a good thing, because the things we buy in the grocery store now are so often highly processed and unhealthy. Sugary cereals are not condemned in Scripture, but we should avoid them. Sugar wasn't an issue then, but it is now. Indeed, just being a vegetarian is no guarantee of getting something good. French fries are something a vegetarian can eat, but they increase the risk of a person's developing diabetes because of all the fat in the oil used to prepare them. Having said this, though, most high fiber foods – which generally means plant foods – work to counteract many diseases.

Some principles of diet that will help us today are: (a) Eat plants rather than animals. Somewhere down the food chain something has to start by eating a plant, so why get your plant-based nutrients second hand? Go to the source! Eat the plant yourself instead of letting some animal get to it first. (b) Eat a variety of foods, so that you end up with a colorful plate. A plate of food that's all one color means something is missing. (c) Avoid excessive fat and sugar. This goes beyond the plate itself to include the glass beside your plate. Soda pop is pure sugar. Don't drink it.

Here are a few web sites you might want to check for further information on how to survive in a modern grocery store. It's not easy!

Table 1
Some Web Sites

Topic	URL
Cancer Nutrition Center	http://www.cancernutrition.com/
Native American Diabetes Project	http://www.laplaza.org/health/dwc/nadp/

Women's Health Information	http://www.4woman.gov/minority/americanindian/
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