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The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology

Edited by

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

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CHAPTER 4

Eating

Dorothy C. Bass

Tomato, avocado, and fresh mozzarella with pesto. Red wine. Roast pork, corn off the cob, green beans. Peach pie and coffee. When my friends and I gather for dinner on Friday evening, this will be our menu. Because it is late summer, all the fruits and vegetables except the avocado will be fresh from the local farmers' market. The wine will be from California, the coffee from Ethiopia. I have avoided asking about the origin and processing of the pork.

In intimate maneuvers that might seem crude if they were not so familiar, my friends and I will convey these foods to our mouths and take them into our bodies, where they will be transformed into the tissues and energy upon which our lives depend. This concrete activity will situate us within a vast web of production and consumption, linking us to farmers and other workers and to soil, water, and sun. Simultaneously, we will be related to complex networks of trade that implicate us in social and economic arrangements with tremendous impact on billions of people and animals and on the earth itself.

As important as these material relations are, however, far more will be on our table than what is obviously physical. Every dish will bear a story, the corn recalling my mother, the salad a trip to Italy. The meal will occupy an ample portion of time; it is scheduled for an evening that suits our rhythms of work and refreshment, and it will be enjoyed at a slow pace to allow even those who cook and clean up to find deep relaxation. Before we eat, we will ask God to bless the gifts before us. Then, between bites of food, we will talk. We will discuss the events of the week, and we will speak with fondness of two others who would be with us had they not died too soon. Hosts and guests alike will come to the table hoping to please and to serve one another through the shared rhythms of a meal.

What could be more fundamental to a way of life than food? The necessity of nutrition is the basis of food's importance, of course. We human beings are embodied; we need physical nourishment, and without it we die. This reality has pressed in upon

humankind throughout history and is never far from the consciousness of a great many people in the world today. Perhaps a hard-wired awareness of this vulnerability explains why eating is so often a keystone of cultural and personal identity: on every table – every surface or vessel where food is offered – meaning as well as nutrition is stirred into every dish. Communities take shape, or not, through the patterns by which food is shared, or not. Children learn what to expect and how to behave. Deep and lasting dispositions toward land, plants, animals, and human beings are cultivated across centuries of agriculture, cuisine, and etiquette. At many tables, knowledge of salt and spice, wisdom about equity and pleasure, and virtues of gratitude, temperance, patience, and generosity are ingested as well.

The texts, traditions, and formal rituals of Christianity overflow with stories of food and with food itself, blessed, broken, and given to the faithful in holy communion and also shared with all who are in need. Scripture and liturgy will come richly into play as we consider how eating, which is one of the fundamental practices of daily life for all people, becomes for Christians a crucial part of faithful life as well. A practical theological approach to this concern, however, begins not with these sources but in contemporary kitchens, markets, and fields – including not only the bountiful ones from which my friends and I will eat, but also those that are empty or cluttered with junk.

To develop a practical theology of eating, I must attend closely to a situation that is as near and concrete as my own kitchen and the larger social context in which it belongs. As I begin, I am aware that my attention is already influenced by Christian faith; my ears are already tuned to the cries of those who hunger for food, for justice, for community, or for God. After exploring what is – a task in which I will gain much insight from many beyond my faith community – I will turn more directly to the wisdom articulated and embodied in scripture and tradition as I seek to “clarify the contours of a way of life that reflects God’s active presence and responds to human beings’ fundamental needs,” as Craig Dykstra and I recently wrote in defining practical theology. This kind of theology, we continued,

also seeks to guide and strengthen persons and communities to embody this way of life. Thus practical theology requires stereoscopic attention to both the specific moves of personal and communal living and the all-encompassing horizon of faith. It is undertaken in hope for the well-being of persons, communities of faith, and all creation. (Bass and Dykstra 2008: 13)

Matters of Life and Death

Although food is essential to life, contemporary patterns of production and consumption may be driving human beings and the earth on which we rely for food to premature death. For the first time in history, meeting the nutritional needs of all is possible. Even so, one billion people don’t know where their next meal is coming from, and even in the United States nearly one-quarter of all children live daily with food insecurity (Beckmann 2010: 24). Modern agricultural technologies have increased overall production for the time being – often through the use of petroleum-based fertilizers and

genetically modified crops – but they are also depleting soil, polluting water, promoting unsustainable monocultures, and rendering small-scale subsistence farming economically untenable. Meanwhile, factory-like facilities produce meat and dairy products that blatantly disregard the well-being of animals. The entire system relies on low-wage laborers in US and global fields and factories and on oil-thirsty methods of distribution. Heavily processed and sold at prices kept artificially low by subsidies and disregard for long-term environmental costs, the food most readily available to American consumers contains far more sugar, fat, and sodium than we can healthily absorb. Moreover, millions of Americans live in “food deserts” – impoverished neighborhoods where food is available only at liquor and convenience stores – and have access only to this substandard fare. Because it eases short-term burdens on consumers, such food is “fast,” whether bought at a chain restaurant or in a grocery store. However, such food also draws those who depend on it into a diminished way of life. Pressed for time and uprooted from ancestral culinary traditions by the same market forces that deliver cheap calories, even those who have food forget how to cook, how to enjoy an evening at table with family and friends, and how to be thankful for the food set before them.

This technology-enabled system, which delivers nutritional goods to consumers in forms that require little thought and effort on their part, cloaks from visibility the costs of those goods – in this case, for example, costs in labor, which are real even though not performed by consumers themselves, and damage to animals, land, and water. In his wise analysis of contemporary life, philosopher Albert Borgmann (1988) unveils this *trompe l'oeil*. The increasing reach of technology and its products into more and more aspects of our lives, he insists, is shaping a way of life that masks “burdens” and stifles human excellence and relationships, forming us as beings that consume the world rather than engaging with it. Borgmann urges recovery of a more purposeful “culture of the table” as a path toward a more authentic way of being in the world.

Activists have also been working in recent years to make the dominant food system visible. In the United States, bestselling books (Schlosser 2001; Pollan 2006; Kingsolver 2007), popular films (*Food, Inc.*), and widespread media attention are slowly increasing public awareness of where our food comes from and why that matters. Concurrently, an international movement has emerged that urges consumers to discover the pleasures of healthy food that is justly produced and generously shared. Vegetable gardens are springing up in vacant lots, backyards, schoolyards, and churchyards, including many planted as sources of fresh produce for those who live in food deserts or for distribution through food pantries. Consumers are beginning to press for humanely produced meat and dairy products. Farmers’ markets are making locally grown produce more available, thereby both resisting factory farming and supporting individual farmers who are trying to develop more sustainable agricultural models. Meanwhile, interest in cooking and dining – often featuring “slow” food that is local, prepared with care, and shared on a relaxed schedule, like my Friday night supper with friends – is on the rise.

Neither analyzing problems in contemporary food systems nor joining a movement to reform them belongs to Christians alone. Those who are calling contemporary consumers to more life-giving practices come from many faith traditions and from none. However, for those who do follow Jesus, this set of concerns comes close to the heart of

Christian faith. Jesus is one who is “known in the breaking of the bread,” as the disciples who recognize him in Emmaus on Easter night report (Luke 24:35; NRSV). The stories Christians have told of Jesus across the centuries are full of meals, including an outdoor banquet for thousands derived from just a few fish and loaves of bread, and meals are also prominent in the stories he told, many of which encourage generous sharing with those in need. The earliest Christian communities, historians now believe, began as meal-sharing fellowships (Taussig 2009), and a meal of bread and wine still stands at the center of Christian worship. This is how God comes to us, Christians affirm: as an embodied human being who “came eating and drinking” (Matt. 11:19) and who, on the night before his death, hosted his friends at a meal and told them to remember him whenever they take bread and cup (1 Cor. 11:23–26).

Even though I try to follow Jesus, I admit that I usually plan a dinner like the one on Friday without giving it much thought. The menu and the evening’s rhythms come to me as if by second nature, for by now I have hosted hundreds of dinners. Further, I admit that often the words my table companions and I mumble before picking up our forks are spoken rather thoughtlessly: “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed, and may there be a goodly share on every table everywhere.” Lately, though, I have felt challenged to be more mindful. On Friday, food more ample and more costly than is rightfully ours will be on our table, and even before we touch it it will have left a significant carbon footprint on the earth. Are my table companions and I simply “foodies,” privileged diners whose delight in a good meal overwhelms our sense of justice? Do we take seriously the words of our table prayer? Why do we pray at table anyway? What does our meal have to do with God?

Today, discerning how to live faithfully as Christians who have enough to eat must include attention to life-giving practices of producing and sharing food, both for our own good and for the good of all God’s creatures. Fortunately, Christian resources for fostering more life-giving forms of life at table are rich and deep. Bringing these to bear is one of the most urgent tasks of practical theology in our time.

Duties and Delight, Rules and Refreshment

The first thing that must be said when Christians reflect theologically on eating is that God intends for all to be fed. Food is not meant for the rich only, but also for the beggar at the gate (Luke 16:19–31). Though irreducible, the call to justice is not our tradition’s only word regarding food, however. The second word, equal in importance to the first, is “thanks,” offered in grateful acknowledgment that all food comes from God and is very good. Pondering the notion of faithful eating, then, we enter a realm of both duty and delight – two goods that can conflict and that in any case can never be fully grasped in this life. Indeed, ambiguity pervades human life at table, and not only through this tension. To eat is needful and natural, but sustaining a healthy balance between eating too much and too little is difficult. Further, the nourishment of some creatures depends on the deaths of many others, both animals and plants.

In spite of the inescapable tensions and ambiguities of eating, we are more exposed to rigid rules of one kind or another here than in almost any other realm of life. Many

would abstain on principle from the roast pork I plan to serve, and some would condemn my serving it at all. Observant Jews and Muslims would reject the pork in obedience to ancient laws that mark communal boundaries for many in both traditions. Vegetarians would likewise offer opposition on the basis of religious belief (many Hindus and Seventh-Day Adventists) or ethical conviction (critics of the factory farms on which the hog whose flesh we will eat was probably raised). These days it becomes more and more likely that one will serve the “wrong” thing to one’s guests, and even when hosts make well-received selections nutritional guidelines that are extremely easy to violate are always hovering nearby. Guarded by such an array of prohibitions, a table can easily become an arena of conflict between the “righteous” and the “unrighteous,” who today arrive as vegan and carnivore, slender and obese, adventuresome and picky.

Combat of other kinds also shows up at table. Though shared family meals are an ideal in American culture, most of the families I know (including my own) have had not only some of their warmest experiences but also some of their biggest fights at the table. Families that shun certain members or avoid eating together entirely are not hard to find. In this situation and others, food, which should be a source of health and joy, can become a source of isolation and shame. Think, for example, of those whose health fails when they become psychologically or metabolically unable to negotiate the mixed signals of a fast food culture that also prizes thinness.

Developing a practical theology of eating is not only a matter of deciding what we *should* do and then setting up rules to make sure we do it. Discerning a life-giving way of life at table also entails recognizing God’s presence in the meals we already share. Such recognition will involve us in saying “grace” again and again. By this I mean not only repeating table prayers, though this is a good and important act. I mean also inviting one another to relax into the gracious love of God, trusting that Jesus, who ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, would and does gladly eat with us.

Imagining the tables at which we eat each day as sites of freedom and reconciliation does not negate dietary guidelines, cancel our obligation to care for land and animals, or undo our duty to help hungry people obtain food. Rather, mealtimes that are respites from recrimination may offer the kind of refreshment that nourishes hope and courage, preparing us to embrace a life-giving way of life for others once each meal is over.

Sources of Wisdom

The legacy we have received from our ancestors in faith does not tell us exactly how to resolve personal or global problems with food. However, it does help us to look more deeply into the world in which we grapple with these problems. It helps us to envision a table life where those who eat are attentive and responsive to God as God becomes manifest in the breaking of the bread.

Christians believe that the God we know in Jesus is the same God who creates and sustains all that is, partly by providing food. “God cause[s] the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart,” sings the psalmist, articulating a confidence in God’s provision that informs both Judaism and Christianity (Ps. 104:14–15a). Both of the creation

stories in Genesis place the original human beings in surroundings rich in edible plants, and in Genesis 2 the earth creature – biblical scholar Phyllis Trible's term for the first human, who is not yet male or female – is made precisely in order to till and keep a garden (1986: 75–85). Indeed, this “groundling,” to use biblical scholar William Brown's term, is intimately related to the garden, having been formed not just from dust but from arable soil – a connection that also links the English words “human” and “humus” (2010: 81–82). The human being needs the garden for sustenance, and the flourishing of the garden depends on human labor. One does not have to take this account literally to acknowledge its profound insight into human capacities, the central role of agriculture in human well-being, and the damage that ensues when human beings abandon forms of tilling and keeping that are commensurate with the well-being of the land itself. Indeed, contemporary concern about this damage has prompted the biblical scholar Ellen Davis (2008) to retrieve a theology of agriculture and food justice that runs throughout Hebrew scripture.

Theology becomes a resource for reflection partly by clothing contemporary human activities and questions in language derived from the stories believers understand to be their own. Were we to retrieve a Christian narrative of eating as a human practice, we would encounter a story that not only tells of ancient things but also sheds light on today's world. The story of this practice begins, we might say, when God plants a garden and gives it to humans to till and keep, that they might have food. The story ends, a prophet declares, in a great feast (Isa. 25:6–10a). Between that planting and that promise, the plot thickens, as sin and hardship destroy the fullness and balance evident in these two scenes. In biblical stories and in our own daily lives, appetites become disordered, and harm comes from indiscriminate eating (Gen. 3). Famine, a stubborn recurrence across the generations, sends Jacob and his sons to Egypt (Gen. 41–46); it afflicts lands south of Egypt today. Greed and the economic and social structures that institutionalize greed corrupt how food is distributed and shared, granting different people vastly different positions and quantities of food at the tables of the world, as the rich man and Lazarus knew so well (Luke 16:19–31). In the midst of this same world, however, another way of life at table is both promised and provided by Jesus, who invites sinners to share meals with him, discloses the abundance at the heart of the universe, and finally gives himself to the world as nourishment that will never fail.

Stories and doctrines wither if detached from actual life. Thus Christian wisdom about eating is also embodied in the practices performed by those who have cherished these stories across the centuries. Eating is first of all a human practice, but it can be done Christianly – not only in the sense that people who call themselves Christian are the ones doing the practicing, but also in the sense that practitioners try to be attentive to how the practice joins their lives to the life of God in and for the world. Significant changes occur over time and from place to place, as believers borrow from, contribute to, and blend into various cultures. In some periods, eating practices seem not to have received or required much thought. At other times, however, important changes in actual life have evoked critical questions requiring serious theological debate and re-assessment, as systematic theologian Kathryn Tanner suggests (2005: 228–234). Such questions arose, for example, when Gentiles joined the Jewish community that proclaimed Jesus as Messiah. Would Gentiles be required to observe Jewish dietary laws?

If not, did this imply that the division of foods into the clean and the unclean was not of God? And must all in the increasingly diverse community agree about what is right to eat? How the community answered these questions – not only in words but also in revised practices – would have lasting impact on the Christian movement (Acts 11:1–18; 1 Cor. 8).

Practices related to food, undertaken over time and in the company of wise and seasoned practitioners, have the power to form and even to transform persons and communities – a power acknowledged not only within Christianity but also in other religious traditions. Across the centuries, for example, many religiously serious people have adopted the discipline of fasting as a way of heightening awareness of the body's hungers, so as not to be controlled by them. For some Christian ascetics, fasting is a first step in spiritual training; it teaches practitioners to identify and to relinquish distracting thoughts ("What shall I have for a snack? When will the dinner bell ring?") in order to free space for God in one's heart, mind, and soul. In doing so, they rehearse a skill that can later be brought to bear on other thoughts as well (Funk 1998: 26–36). More broadly, rhythms of the liturgical year commend fasting at certain times, feasts at others, and something in between on ordinary, "ferial" days. Within these annual rhythms, which are observed in most churches worldwide, Christians repeatedly experience in their own bodies the sweetness of a baby's birth, the thirst of wilderness wanderers, and the joy of breaking bread with one who is risen from the dead. Practices for sharing food with those in need can also follow these rhythms – Lent is traditionally a season of alms-giving, for example – but these practices also operate year round. These too have emerged over time and adapted to the needs of different contexts, from a first-century collection for those suffering from famine (Acts 11:27–30) to the contemporary efforts of Bread for the World to promote national and international policies aimed at ending food insecurity.

Communities of faith have practiced life at table in countless specific forms adapted to their own historical settings: Catholic worker soup kitchens, Midwestern potluck suppers, Anabaptist love feasts, fasts to protest war, youth-group pizza parties, and many, many more. Because food is so central to a way of life, practices of life at table soon prove to implicate every other important Christian practice as well. Hospitality, community, economics, testimony: all of these practices and more – never fully realized, but persistently present as vision, command, and hope – have influenced how Christians eat together. And all were at least subconsciously on my mind as I planned our Friday night supper.

Gathering at the Table

As a householder in a consumer culture with a broken food system, it would be easy for me to avoid the vision and practice of a table life that is attentive and responsive to God's gracious presence. Food that is "fast" is always readily available; in fact, my table companions and I eat it more often than we like to admit. We could try harder not to do so, I suppose, but this would not necessarily protect us from becoming epicures whose pride in our own good taste further separates us from those who cannot afford

such fare, or open our eyes to God's presence in the food, our companions, and the world.

However, years of hearing stories of God's provision and participating in practices of the church have stirred our hunger for more than good food. Each Sunday we have been guests at a meal the theologian Gordon Lathrop (1977) calls "a hungry feast," a meal at which our own deep hunger for the reign of God is reawakened and joined to the yearning of all creation for unity and peace. Here we receive small portions of simple food which "earth has given and human hands have made." We not only remember but also join the meal Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before his death, at which he offers his own self, his body and blood, in the form of bread and wine. In eating this food, we believe, we are united with him and also with everyone else who shares in this meal. This is "*for you*," the minister who hands me the bread or cup says – a direct address from Christ that I find very moving. At the same time, it is also utterly clear that this nourishment is not only for me or even only for the church. As Jesus was blessed, broken, and given for the life of the world, so now we who eat this food are also blessed, broken, and given in service to God and the world God so loves.

As captured powerfully by British theologian David Ford in his account of "the eucharistic self," the Lord's table discloses the abundance at the heart of all that is; inviting us to experience the world and ourselves as God's new creation (1999: 137–166). Here we may learn to see, even in this hurting world, the abundance of an overflowing cup enjoyed in the presence of enemies (Ps. 23:5); the abundance of a life poured out for the sake of the world; and the abundance of mercy that makes possible a community of hope drawn from every nation. Around this table, we also recognize how incomplete and offensive even our most thoughtful table practices can be. In no way, I realize, can our small, exclusive Friday night gathering compare to the great banquet God has in store for all (and nor, of course, can the imperfect congregation where I commune). Even so, our ecclesial "foretaste of the feast to come" can sharpen our discernment of what truly nourishes and what does not. It can continually stir our hunger for God's realm. It can teach us to say "thanks" to God, not only during services of eucharist (from the Greek word for "thanksgiving") but at other times as well. It can knit us into a new kind of community. It can reshape how congregations approach their food ministries, moving us beyond mere provision to addressing the wider political and economic injustices behind food inequity. It can be a gathering where we practice a way of being in the world that is responsive to God and the true needs of others. And, remarkably, all these goods can and do come to rest once in a while even on the inadequate table where my friends and I will gather on Friday.

A practical theology of eating begins in contemporary kitchens, markets, and fields, but then it journeys through texts, stories, liturgies, and various historical situations before it returns there once again. In this chapter, we have encountered a broken food system and an array of life-giving alternatives, including a reform movement in the larger society and an evolving body of Christian wisdom that comes to us in scripture, practices, and liturgy. With these at hand, we return again to a contemporary kitchen, my own. What life-giving alternatives may be embodied there?

My journey through Christian wisdom has persuaded me that caring for the land, air, and water on which food production depends, pressing for justice for those who

grow, harvest, and prepare food, and providing food for those who have none, both by sharing what I have and by working for more equitable patterns of distribution, all belong to the life of faith. (It is time, I realize, to inquire into the origins and processing of the pork.) At the same time, I see myself anew as one who comes from soil and hungers for daily bread just as all humans do, in spite of my presently privileged position on the world's food chain. Thus I pray for daily bread and give thanks for what I receive. Inattention to these duties will diminish my delight, I have come to know after sporadic periods of inattention to the grace of eating.

This journey actively encourages me to take delight as well. I pray that the few hours my friends and I share will provide a feast of time, food, and the mutual forbearance that signals the presence of mercy. When we invite Jesus to be our guest at table, I hope that each person will remember that in Christ God is "for you." I hope that this knowledge will free all of us to savor our food with joy. I hope that wine will gladden our hearts. And I hope that we will depart from the table grateful for nourishment and for friendship, but also still hungry for the day when there will be a goodly share on every table everywhere.

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Further Reading

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