

## ABSTRACT

Daily Bread: A Liturgical and Narrative Guide to Good Eating

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This thesis examines the ways Christians might view and interact with daily bread differently than those operating under secular modern frameworks. In it, I examine certain Christian liturgical practices of fasting and feasting as interactions with food which can serve as correctives for two poles of problematic eating in the modern world: over-eating and under- or not-eating. I argue that the liturgy sanctifies body and soul by inviting participants into a particularly Christian narrative about creatures and Creator, one in which God is ultimately responsible for the provision and redemption of His creation. By contrasting the humility and gratitude of these liturgical practices with the pride and distrust of what will be described as wrong eating, I demonstrate how scriptural and liturgical narratives of divine provision, abundance, and salvation both affect and reflect one's relationship with food and empower individuals towards more holy relationships with God.

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DAILY BREAD: A LITURGICAL AND NARRATIVE GUIDE TO GOOD EATING

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
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Honors Program

By  
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## DEDICATION

*To my parents*, for in their home I was taught the love of food and the joy of sharing the  
kitchen's bounty.

*To dear friends*, whose boundless encouragement of my passion upheld me in this  
endeavor.

*And to a young woman*, that she may one day believe in her intrinsic beauty as an  
image-bearer of the invisible God.

## EPIGRAPH

*“Yet he commanded the skies above,  
and opened the doors of heaven;  
he rained down on them manna to eat,  
and gave them the grain of heaven.  
Mortals ate of the bread of angels;  
he sent them food in abundance.”*

Psalm 78:23-25

*“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,  
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’”*

John 6:35

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction: Food Matters

The faith of Christians ought to distinguish their lives from non-Christians in many, if not all, aspects—if not outwardly, then certainly inwardly, as their morality and ethics are rooted in a unique, transcendent narrative of creation, love, and redemption. These distinctions need not merely be apparent amid the fray of hot-button issues such as abortion, war, nuclear weaponry, euthanasia, and sexual orientation and activity—all important issues, of course—but also, and perhaps especially, in the ordinary issues which all Christians address every day and even every hour. Perhaps the most inescapable daily concern facing any faithful follower of Christian, and indeed, any living and breathing human being, is that of sustenance and nourishment—simply put, of food.

However, despite the proximity and intimacy of the practice of eating, the average Christian, particularly in modern, developed society, is unlikely to consider the correlation between the food which enters his mouth on a daily basis and the state of his soul in relation to his Creator. This problem appears even graver when one considers that modern attitudes towards food have become deeply problematic. On one end of the spectrum is a diet-obsessed “cult of slenderness” which idolizes some ideal form of the human body and which casts aside food as an enemy to that form.<sup>1</sup> On the other end is the well-known problem of obesity, which seems to grow every day at alarming rates.

However, there is far more to say about these problems than their material manifestations; indeed, the physical problems are but the symptoms of a much deeper

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Louise Bringle, *The God of Thinness: Gluttony and Other Weighty Matters* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 24.

illness. I would like to posit that our struggle with food is not merely a physical problem, and that in fact, the problem continually worsens because we refuse to acknowledge that it is anything more than a merely physical matter. Rather, the cultural tendency in the modern and developed world to struggle with and against food is a material problem which reflects and affects spiritual matters. In the following thesis, I aim to discuss food and its manner of consumption as something more than the mere material issue which it has become in the modern and developed world. In order to argue for eating as a matter of great psychological and spiritual importance and for its capacity as a visible indicator of the better or worse ordering of the soul, the first chapter will draw upon the long Christian tradition which teaches the intimate and significant connections between the body and the soul. This rich perspective on the relationship between the body and the soul is in stark contrast to the modern view of the body as an entity dichotomized from the moral and spiritual element of humans and as a mere object of control and of manipulation. Drawing on sources such as Joel James Shuman's treatise on biomedical ethics and the Church, I argue that this fractured view has its roots in Cartesian dualism and in modern individualism, and I demonstrate how its trajectory disallows the notion of food and food choices as being weighted with moral or spiritual significance. In light of a proper Christian view which recognizes that the body and its well-being cannot be neglected in pursuit of spiritual well-being, I argue that it is crucial that Christians consider matters of food and eating in relation to the state of their spiritual matters. If bodies are significant in Christian considerations of the soul's journey to God, then food—the substance most necessary for the life and health of bodies—must also be considered as significant.



For Christians throughout the centuries, the recognition of the power of food as both an entrapment unto vice and as a substance able to be employed in the service of holy celebration has led to the development of a characteristic rhythm in the Christian liturgy which cycles properly between fasting and feasting. As I will discuss in the second chapter, both practices embody a particular narrative, one in which the creature is taught to humbly and gratefully submit to the abundant material and spiritual providence of the Creator. Scriptural paradigms provide this narrative of God's constant faithfulness in fulfilling His promises to His people, in material ways and ultimately, through salvation from sin through Jesus Christ.

The third chapter will discuss problematic attitudes towards food as antithetical to the natural humility of proper fasts and feast. The manifestations of these attitudes occupy two sides of the same coin. The first is the problematic habit of what I will call over-eating (or its more traditional name of gluttony). This problem, as I define it, is both the familiar problem of obesity in the developed world as well as the more subtle issues of comfort or binge eating and with obsession of the gourmet. The second, and sometimes more slippery to identify, problematic modern attitude towards food manifests itself in the practices of what I refer to as under-eating or not-eating. Broad brushes will not do to define this issue, which can most succinctly be defined as the viewing of food as an enemy and as nothing more than a substance which must be had in order to keep the body functioning. The embodied practices of this attitude range from the fad diet to the clinically diagnosed eating disorder, and all of them share the same prideful insistence on shunning the goods of body and of food. Indeed, both under-eating and its converse,

over-eating, demonstrate a prideful posture of the creature who refuses to properly acknowledge the good and providentially given gifts of the Creator.

In the final chapter, I will set forth some final reflections on the proper Christian attitude towards food and its consumption. I aim to demonstrate how proper feasting and fasting, being those goods which have been sinfully twisted into over-eating and under-eating, possess the potential to cure and redeem both the physical and, most importantly, the spiritual consequences of sinful manners of consuming (or not consuming) food. Where under-eating has perversely mirrored the holy abstinence of fasting, the fast serves to cure and redeem the purely material concentrations of improper dieting, as well as of improper over-eating. The same holds for the sacred celebration of the feast, which, though often twisted into an inordinate overindulgence in food, functions as the redemption of that excessive habit as well as of the habit of viewing food as an enemy.

I conclude that while strict prescriptive lines may be difficult to draw, Christians should consume food intentionally and thoughtfully, always considering how their choices reflect and affect their attitudes towards the abundant providence of the Creator whom they worship. Of particular significance to the Christian's proper relationship with his daily bread is the liturgical rhythm between feast and fast, two practices which embody the appropriate human posture towards both the material and spiritual providence of God. The Christian ought to relate to his food with humility and gratitude, whether feasting, fasting, or simply enjoying an ordinary meal.

## *The Spiritual Significance of Food and Eating*

### *A Theological Tradition: The Body and the Soul*

From early on, the Christian tradition has taught that the physical body is an important aspect of the human creature. Early in the development of the Church's doctrines, theologians recognized the strong correlation between the discipline of the body and the discipline of the soul; to view one out of balance with the other was to make a grave spiritual mistake. Perhaps most obvious was the serious effect of bodily sin upon the health of the soul; more subtle, but just as significant, was the influence upon the spiritual element of a well-ordered and balanced physical element.

The distinctions and exact relationships between these two aspects of the human creature have rarely, if ever, been completely clear. Still, much of the Christian tradition has valued the body as morally significant and impossible to separate from the spiritual aspect. St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae*, insists that "man must be considered a compound whose substance is both spiritual and corporeal."<sup>2</sup> In questioning whether the soul is the full substance of man, Aquinas quotes St. Augustine's assessment that "man is neither the soul alone, nor the body alone, but body and soul together."<sup>3</sup> Arguing that the soul absolutely imbues the body, Augustine says that "in any body whatever the soul is in whole in the whole and whole in every part."<sup>4</sup> It is clear, then, that at least the larger branches of orthodox Christianity have always held that man, while participating in both the visible and invisible realms, cannot be neatly split between his

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<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), Prologue to 1a.

<sup>3</sup> Aquinas, 1a.75, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas, 1a. 76, 8.

two natures. In *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine instructs his reader to think of himself “as a whole embracing both a soul and a body...for the soul and the body constitute a man.”<sup>5</sup> A modern theologian, Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, captures this point as well: “Human beings are not simply minds temporarily rattling around in material vessels; we quite profoundly *are* our bodies.”<sup>6</sup>

What must now be examined are the embodied practices of the faithful which developed throughout the history of the Church from this conception of an intimately linked body and soul. Christians, informed by the cautionary teachings in the Gospels and in the Epistles, became aware of the body’s capability to wreak havoc on the soul. In response to such realizations, particular movements stirred within the Church focusing on habits and lifestyles which intentionally disciplined the body in order to better discipline the soul towards greater love of God—the understood end of the person. The two greatest of these movements can be generally classified as the ascetic and monastic traditions of the Christian faith.

David Grumett and Rachel Muers, in narrating the ascetic tradition, point out that, “by the third century, large numbers of Christians in [Egypt, Palestine, and Syria] were withdrawing from urban society into the desert in search of a simple, solitary existence devoted to prayer and motivation.”<sup>7</sup> The desert life brought with it, predictably, a marked decrease in temptation towards bodily pleasures, whether sexual or alimentary. The

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<sup>5</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1958), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “Being Baptized: Bodies and Abortion,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 252. Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> David Grumett and Rachel Muers, *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, meat, and Christian diet* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1.

particular ascetics, called the anchorites, who adopted the wilderness as their home realized the vast improvement which could be made upon the discipline of their spiritual lives when the physical appetites were curbed. Grumett and Muers note this defining aspect of the desert philosophy: “In the desert...abstinence [was] understood as part of a wider discipline of which the central principle was the spiritual government and transformation of the ascetic’s body.”<sup>8</sup> The Christian community as a whole recognized the revolutionary nature of the ascetic journey which these so-called spiritual athletes pursued.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, the intense holiness which characterized these individuals’ lives evidenced the importance in a spiritual undertaking of paying attention to the discipline of the body.

Over time, the solitary ascetic practices of the desert evolved into the communal ascetic practices of the monastery. Though to varying degrees, these monastic communities retained the intense asceticism of their forebears. Indeed, perhaps the most defining characteristics of the monastic tradition were and are its strict rules governing the activities and habits of the body in order to achieve a greater love of God. None of the three monastic vows—poverty, chastity, and obedience—excludes physical considerations from the life of the monk; the significance of the physical aspect of the human creature is always borne in mind. Like the Desert Fathers before them, the monks recognized that bringing the body under obedience would aid in doing likewise with the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>9</sup> Bringle, 43.

soul. Indeed, it was out of the monastic movement that “the tradition of the ‘seven deadly sins’” emerged, gluttony among them.<sup>10</sup>

Mary Louise Bringle notes the “occasional tendencies [of the monastic tradition] toward a Gnostic or ‘other-worldly’ asceticism.”<sup>11</sup> This is certainly an accurate account; as monastics and ascetics strove tirelessly against the temptations of the body, ever seeking to subdue gluttony and lust, they sometimes overcorrected. The result of this overcorrection led many monks to a total shunning of the flesh as an aspect of the human creature which served no purpose except to hold the faithful Christian back from purer love of God. It seemed as though every struggle against temptation could be cured if only the pesky body were not in the picture.

Indeed, from the very time that Christians began to formulate doctrines of body and soul, key theological figures such as St. Augustine were required to counterbalance the all-too-easy mistake of utterly disregarding the body. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine writes:

Those who seek to [destroy their flesh] perversely war on their bodies as though they were natural enemies. In this way they have been deceived by the words, ‘The flesh lusteth against the spirit: and the spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary to one another.’ For this was said on account of the unconquered habit of the flesh against which the spirit has a concupiscence of its own, not that the body should be destroyed, but that its concupiscence, which is its evil habit, should be completely conquered so that it is rendered subject to the spirit as the natural order demands.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than wage a war of annihilation on the body, Augustine argues, Christians ought to seek out ways in which the body can be properly ordered to the soul. Never, he writes,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>12</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 21.

were the two intended to be pitted against each other. While bodily discipline is certainly a good, it must be pursued in a way which honors the holistic individual.

Since after the resurrection the body will thrive in complete peace immortally in subjection to the spirit, in this present life we should seek that the habit of the flesh should be changed for the better lest it resist the spirit with inordinate demands. [...] The spirit does not resist in hate but in a desire for dominion, because it wishes what it loves to be subjected to something better.<sup>13</sup>

Among many serious implications of the temptation of denying any good in the physical body—or in any other aspect of physical creation—was that upon developing a proper Christology. If the material realm had no significance, and indeed, was nothing but a death-trap to sin, why had Christ chosen to take on a physical nature in order to perform His redemptive work? Why had He blessed such common elements such as water and bread and wine to be the signs of His grace? The various heresies that succumbed to the temptation of dichotomizing the supposedly sin-ridden and irredeemable material world and the ideal spiritual world can be gathered under the common heading of gnosticism. While gnostic conceptions of the body claimed a place within Christianity, the beliefs of group such as the Manichees and the Arians have been considered an unorthodox minority from the beginning.

Despite the condemnation of these early heresies by various church leaders and councils in the first few centuries of Christianity, their tendencies would continue to penetrate certain practices of the faithful. For instance, Bringle mentions the so-called “holy anorexics”—nuns who so craved to share the physical suffering of Jesus that their bodies wasted away as a consequence of their extreme asceticism.<sup>14</sup> In many instances, the superiors or confessors of these women had to urge them towards a more balanced

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>14</sup> Bringle, 78.

view of their body. The focus of such extreme exercises could turn towards utter control of the physical body, a goal which obscured the goods of the soul.

From the condemnation of gnosticism as heretical, Christians can understand the body to be a vital element of the human individual. However, while maintaining that the body, having been redeemed by Christ's assumption of it and thus being something which will accompany humans into paradisaal existence, is a significant aspect of the moral and spiritual life, the Christian must remember that the goods of the body ultimately serve the goods of the soul. Joel Shuman writes:

Physical and emotional health are of course goods that Christians *should* desire; they are not, however, goods that should be pursued absolutely. What finally matters when Christians are sick or dying [...] but that they remain faithful to their most basic convictions about what it means to worship a crucified God.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, any efforts made to discipline the body fail if they are simply motivated by physical gains or goods without reference to the highest goods of the soul. The ultimate good of the soul, and thus of the whole person, is, as St. Augustine so classically defines it, the love of the Triune God.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps most importantly for Christians, the body is significant because of its role in salvation. Emmanuel Katongole notes that it is “a key conviction of Christian life...that the body matters for Christian salvation since as Christians we believe that we are saved in and through the body, our own bodies, but ultimately the Body of Christ.”<sup>17</sup> Without the body, one has only docetism or gnosticism—a heretical “downplay of the

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<sup>15</sup> Joel James Shuman, *The Body of Compassion: Ethics, Medicine, and the Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2003), xvi. Emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, “Greeting: Beyond Racial Reconciliation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 79.



significance of Jesus' bodily incarnation."<sup>18</sup> Without God becoming flesh, fallen flesh is without true redemption, and orthodox theologians recognized this critical connection very early in Church history. Furthermore, Christianity teaches that the body will be resurrected and serve believers in paradise. For all of these reasons, the body is honored by Christians as a creation of God, the vehicle of salvation via the Incarnation of Christ, and as something which will see resurrection.

### *A Modern Conception of the Human Body*

In stark contrast to this rich and balanced view of Christianity is the modern philosophy of the body. The modern individual defines his world—including himself as an inhabitant of that world—in extremely dualistic terms. This dualism has its roots in the philosophy of René Descartes, whose revolutionary philosophy separated the person into two distinct substances: the *res cogitans*, or the mind, and the *res extensa*, or the body.<sup>19</sup> This particular view, known as Cartesian dualism, has proven very influential in philosophy since, serving as a convenient means of explaining the apparent tension in man between his material and nonmaterial aspects.<sup>20</sup>

With his famous *cogito ergo sum*, Descartes placed the weight of human essence in the mind, or the “thinking” element. In other words, the most essential part of the person is housed in the mind, that singular thing of which an individual can be assured

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>19</sup> Shuman, 15. Translated from the French, *res cogitans* means “thinking thing,” and *res extensa* means “extended thing.”

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Shuman for his concise articulation of the ways in which Cartesian dualism has informed the modern conception of the body and soul. My summary of Descartes's mind-body philosophy draws from Shuman's analysis as well as from both my own reading of Descartes. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Classics of Philosophy*, Volume II, edited by Louis P. Pojman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 465-90.

beyond all doubt. Meanwhile, the body is demoted to mere piece of flesh, a bundle of natural material which can be manipulated and controlled by the mind—indeed, which can do nothing apart from the manipulation and control of the mind. The human essence does not live in the blood and bones, or even the most vital organs, the heart and brain. Take away all these things, Descartes posits (indeed, for all he knows, their existence is a mere illusion, trickery from a malevolent deity), leave only the mind, and you will still have a particular individual.

Before Descartes, few had imagined fragmenting *homo*, that king of creatures, in such a way. With some exceptions (such as the Platonic theory that the soul and the intellect could (and did) exist outside of the body), the pre-Enlightenment view, and especially the pre-Enlightenment Christian view, saw the person as an indivisible whole. As Aquinas so firmly concludes in the *Summa Theologiae*, the soul is indeed *not* the full substance of man: “Hence it is plain that man is no mere soul, but a compound of soul and body.”<sup>21</sup> Until Descartes’s unapologetic shattering of it, the received ideology had been that “the body [was] not simply an inert object that the mind somehow possesses and operates.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite a long tradition that had viewed man holistically, Descartes’s dualistic proposition in the seventeenth century would drastically change the way in which humans viewed their own and others’ bodies. The various philosophies which followed Descartes have led up to the modern moment in which bodies are no longer seen as vessels of any moral value or as channels for moral decay or moral growth. No longer is the body

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<sup>21</sup> Aquinas, 1a.75, 4

<sup>22</sup> Bauerschmidt, 253.

imbued with and connected to the spiritual aspect of the human. Rather, bodies, in being fully material entities which can be considered completely apart from the mind, become value-neutral objects. Meanwhile, if morality and spirituality really do exist (a fact certainly debated in modernity), the superior mind is the seat of moral and spiritual considerations. This objectification tells a particular story about the body: that it has no lasting value or significant implication apart from individual physical health. As Shuman notes, the modern body is viewed as little more than “an object of study and control.” To put it bluntly, the body is nothing more than a collection of nerves and muscles, bones and blood, and this physical composite can be coerced according to human will.<sup>23</sup> Modern dualism is but the secular gnosticism, and as Shuman and Volck note, “Gnosticism...was and is the perennial heresy...because subordinating body to spirit or mind is so powerfully attractive.”<sup>24</sup>

In addition to dualistic and gnostic conceptions of the body, the pervasive individualism of modernity is also antagonistic to the Christian view that the body is intimately connected with the spiritual aspect of the human. Quash summarizes this ideology:

The dominant story in the West, perhaps, is that of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought about the human subject. [One of the defining features of this story] is the moment at which a claim was made for the radical and inalienable freedom and self-possession of the human subject. The human being belongs to himself, according to this claim; he is a center of self-governing rationality and will, and no one and nothing else governs him.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Shuman, xvii.

<sup>24</sup> Joel Shuman and Brian Volck, *Reclaiming the Body: Christians and the Faithful Use of Modern Medicine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 53.

<sup>25</sup> Ben Quash, “Offering: Treasuring the Creation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 306.

Philip Kenneson notes that in our present time, “human beings are most often regarded fundamentally as individuals and only derivatively as social creatures.”<sup>26</sup> Such views insist that some moral and spiritual choices are limited to the determinations of particular individuals. These can include choices about abortion, contraception, sexual activity and orientation, and resuscitation in case of emergency; they can also include choices about food. Such decisions have come to be considered intensely private, and in general, modern society deeply frowns upon the so-called imposition of one person upon another person’s beliefs, opinions, choices, or values.

This sort of mentality is, of course, in direct opposition to the kind of moral legislation, as well as the kind of community, which the Church aims to achieve. Christians believe that “human beings are social creatures...always being formed and shaped by structures and powers outside themselves.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Christians should not easily agree with the concept of private moral beliefs or choices, but hold instead “that there is no neutral way of narrating or rendering human behavior.”<sup>28</sup> Rather, Christians ought to recognize that all individuals, including their bodies, are by virtue of their baptism “incorporated into the Body of Christ,” and therefore, that individuals do not possess autonomy over and sole ownership of their own bodies.<sup>29</sup> The Church—not individuals—holds the power of moral legislation, in stark contrast to a primarily autonomous definition of the person. The baptized body “is not a self-enclosed private

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<sup>26</sup> Philip Kenneson, “Gathering: Worship, Imagination, and Formation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 53.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>29</sup> Bauerschmidt, 253.

domain,” and thus, Christians ought to reject the individualism of modernity and submit their bodies to the authority of Christ’s Body—the Church.

*Relationship with Food Indicative of Relationship with God*

Given that Christianity articulates a particular viewpoint about the intimate correlation between the physical and spiritual aspects of the body, it is not difficult to understand why the consumption of food—one of the most frequent voluntary physical activities of any human being—should matter to a person of the Christian faith. By the same token, it is easy to see how the dualistic modern view of the human individual has led to the belief that a person’s food choices have, at most, an impact on his physical health, but certainly not on his moral or spiritual health. A failure to perceive the correlation of material and spiritual in human nature itself will certainly lead to a failure to perceive the correlation of material and spiritual human choices.

Francine Prose, in her treatise on gluttony, acknowledges a widespread inability to perceive the multiplicity of layers within the modern struggle with food. Had someone like Thomas Aquinas or St. Augustine witnessed this awful phenomenon in their time, she observes, “it would more likely have been recognized for what it really was, as something more substantial than...body image and diet...because in fact, it was a sort of metaphysical discussion, a forum on matters of the body and the spirit.”<sup>30</sup> Misguided attitudes towards food persist in our society because food has lost its identity as an intensely important matter of ethical and spiritual significance. In short, where Christians once saw a deadly sin in over-eating (and would have also discerned in its counterparts, under-eating and not-eating), the secular lens of society shows a lifestyle, a personal

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<sup>30</sup> Francine Prose, *Gluttony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.

choice, or at worst, a mistake, all the while failing to see that the destruction of souls accompanies the destruction of bodies.

The issue of food is not easily navigated by the person of faith, for in this crucial aspect of the human existence, one finds a complex tension between the spiritual and the appetitive. Claude Fischler made the following observation in his *L'Homnivore*: “Food: nothing is more vital, nothing is more intimate.”<sup>31</sup> Angel F. Méndez Montoya quotes these words as an opening to his discussion of the Christian’s difficulty in properly articulating human embodiment, especially human eating. As that which literally becomes our cells, our muscles, and our blood, food possesses a deep and intimate connection with the human being as the inedible aspects of creation simply do not. The act of eating, Montoya writes, “breaks the conventional boundaries of inside and outside” by taking that which is other and making it that which is selfsame.<sup>32</sup> As living, breathing, and yes, *eating* human beings, there is simply no getting around the matter of food.

However, the call is certain upon Christians to shun the tangles and snares of the flesh as a potentially deadly distraction of the soul journeying towards God; this reality can create complications when it comes to discerning matters of proper eating. The Scriptures, as well as other Christian writings, admonish the faithful in no uncertain terms to flee the temptations of the stomach. The ascetic and monastic movements of which a brief overview was given earlier are proof of the extreme caution with which our Christian brothers and sisters have dealt with food and drink. However, what are we to do as living people inhabiting bodies—bodies which are *good* creations of God—if we

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Angel F. Méndez Montoya, *Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

wish to live? We must eat to live. A solution as easy as disregarding physical needs belies the complexity of the way in which body and soul interact in the creature called man.

The human is a being embracing both time and not-time, mortality and immortality. C. S. Lewis's famous fictional demon Screwtape instructs his nephew Wormwood in this matter, writing that "Humans are amphibians—half spirit and half animal. [...] As spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time."<sup>33</sup> Screwtape nearly gets it, but then, as one would expect a minion of Satan to do, commits a heresy: he fails to perceive the spirit and the animal as integrated within the whole human creature. The footnote to Genesis 2:7 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, noting the etymology of that human first name, Adam, makes the following remark about the composite nature of the human being:

The word play on [the Hebrew] "'adam" (human being, here translated "man"... "'adamah" (arable land; here *ground*) introduces a motif characteristic of this tradition: the relation of humankind to the soil from which it was formed. Human nature is not a duality of body and soul; rather God's *breath* animates the *dust* and it becomes a single *living being*.<sup>34</sup>

As this note makes clear, man is marked by his complexity, and can be divided from neither his body nor his soul. The health of either cannot be compromised without serious harm to the whole creature. As Montoya writes:

The body can become strong and healthy, weak or ill, by eating or abstaining from food. Eating can vitalize the body, but it can also make it sick and even bring about death. But eating not only brings about physiological or biological

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<sup>33</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 37.

<sup>34</sup> Coogan, Michael D., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Aug. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), footnote to Gen. 2:7.

change; it is also a means of psychological, affective, and even spiritual transformation.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the Christian Scriptures, food serves to represent divine providence in an actual, material manner. The Garden of Eden is the first such instance, as the writer of Genesis relates that in this paradise “the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.”<sup>36</sup> After the Israelites escaped from the bondage of Egypt, God provided them with nourishment in the desert by daily raining down manna from heaven.<sup>37</sup> Jesus’ first recorded miracle was the turning of water into wine: a liquid providence, but an alimentary one to be sure; it enabled the merry continuance of a wedding feast at Cana.<sup>38</sup> Jesus is also recorded as having miraculously fed crowds of four and five thousand, providing an overabundance of food from but a few loaves and fishes.<sup>39</sup>

Apart from relating instances of God’s material blessings to His people, scriptural mentions of food also play an important role in pointing towards divine providence in the spiritual sense. Eden was certainly full of good things to eat; however, this also metaphorically demonstrates of Adam and Eve’s right spiritual standing with their Creator prior to the invasion of sin. The manna which God gave to the Israelites is surely representative of His providence in fulfilling His covenant to Abraham. Jesus’ food-

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<sup>35</sup> Montoya, 1-2.

<sup>36</sup> Genesis 2:9. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Exodus 16:4-35.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. John 2:1-11.

<sup>39</sup> The miraculous feeding of the five thousand: Cf. Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:5-15; the miraculous feeding of the four thousand: Cf. Matthew 15:32-39, Mark 8:1-9.



related miracles can be taken as symbolic of His ultimate fulfillment and overabundant providence of salvation from sin—indeed, the greatest providence of all.

Taken together, the two scriptural treatments of alimentary providence—literal or material and symbolic or spiritual—can be set within the Christian tradition which claims a significant correlation of body and soul to posit the thesis that one’s relationship with food, or the material gifts of God, can serve as a telling indicator of one’s relationship with God regarding both his material and spiritual gifts. In particular, I would argue that in light of the story of the Scriptures, one can view inappropriate relationships with food as indicative of a prideful posture towards the Creator of all food, and that, similarly, one can view appropriate and holy relationships with food as indicative of a humble posture towards the Giver of all good things.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote: “If I had only one sermon to preach, it would be a sermon against Pride.”<sup>40</sup> Chesterton joins with a strong chorus of Christians who have often held pride to be the deadliest and the most primal of all the vices. In fact, the scheme of Dante’s *Inferno* has no particular place for the prideful, the implication being that in some way, all of the damned are guilty before God of pride. Every conceivable sin (including gluttony, the vice of most apparent significance to the issue of food) seems to stem from this deadly root. Indeed, St. Gregory the Great, in one of the earliest articulations of the *septem principalia uitia*, or the Seven Deadly Sins, pens the well-known phrase: “*Radix quippe cuncti mali superbia est.*”<sup>41</sup> In a striking metaphor, Gregory writes that “when Pride, herself queen of the vices, has fully possessed a

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<sup>40</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 246.

<sup>41</sup> “For pride is the root of all evil.” Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* (Turnholt: Brepols, 1985), XXXI.xlv. Translation is my own.

conquered heart, she hands it over quickly to the seven principal vices, as if to some of her warlords, to destroy it.”<sup>42</sup>

The prideful subscribe to an inherently misguided anthropology which elevates themselves to some illusionary higher place in the cosmos with relation to their fellow men and even more, with relation to their God. Pride is the sin of the creature forgetting that he is essentially *created*; it seems to be the ultimate blasphemy against the Creator, for it baldly proclaims the created order to be flawed and deeply lacking to a point which justifies rebellion.

Primal indeed, pride traces its origins not only to the sinful desires of the first human to “be like God,” but even farther back to the fall of Lucifer.<sup>43</sup> In one of the most influential renderings of Satan in the western world, John Milton in *Paradise Lost* paints the fallen angel as incapable of stomaching what he considers to be an undeservedly servile position in the heavenly order. Perceiving fault in God’s ordained order, he sees fit to rebel against it and achieves the ultimate in psychological malformation with his declaration that it is “better to reign in hell than serve in Heaven.”<sup>44</sup> The tradition, of course, is well-known: this angel’s pride earned him nothing more than a fall like lightning from the heavens.<sup>45</sup> His pride blinded him to the goodness and superabundance of the created order.

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<sup>42</sup> Rhonda L. McDaniel, “Pride Goes Before a Fall: Aldhelm’s Practical Application of Gregorian and Cassianic Conceptions of *Superbia* and the Eight Principal Vices” in *The Seven Deadly Sins: From Communities to Individuals*, edited by Richard Newhauser (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 102

<sup>43</sup> Gen. 3:5.

<sup>44</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, edited by David Scott Kastan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), I.263.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Luke 10:18; Cf. Milton, I.44-49.

What else but this same pride of Satan fueled that original act of human rebellion: the taking and eating of the forbidden fruit? Eve's fatal bite was the direct result of her succumbing to a very tricky temptation from the serpent. That slippery lie said that God's providence in the Garden of Eden was somehow lacking and somehow not sufficient. "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" the serpent asked of Eve, his inquiry lacquered with a false concern for her well-being.<sup>46</sup> The thinly-veiled insinuation that God was withholding blessing from her and her spouse was sufficiently deceptive to blind Eve to the abundance which surrounded her. In a single moment, she chose to believe that she, a creature, could create for herself something better than that which her Creator's providence had already established. She embraced the lie that by eating of a single piece of fruit, all that was missing in her life would come to pass, even though minutes before, it would have never occurred to her that anything at all could be missing. She ate, she convinced her husband to eat, and the first two children of God were exiled from the garden of plentitude into a life of material lack and spiritual pain.

In the fall of man, the ancient sin of pride took the form of wrongful eating: consuming, and therefore becoming one with, that which had been forbidden. The flesh of the fruit—its molecules, its fibers—became one with Eve's flesh. Meanwhile, the spiritual poison which the sweet taste carried with it became one with her spirit, forever changing the constitution of the human being as now tainted with the wages of sin.<sup>47</sup> In that moment, Eve ingested death, and all her descendants became mortal in both body

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<sup>46</sup> Gen. 3:1.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Romans 6:23.

and soul. The queen of the vices handed the queen of mankind and all her descendants over to gluttony.

From this archetype Christians can derive the hypothesis set forth earlier: just as eating possesses an intimate correlation with the life and health of the physical body, so does it also possess an intensely close connection with the life and health of the soul with relation to God. Eating wrongly is for the child of God not simply gluttonous; it is an elementally prideful act against the plentitude of the Creator. The converse is also possible—that is, that eating rightly enacts humble gratitude for and submission to the divine providence. Whereas wrong eating signifies a creature’s incorrect conception of his place in relation to God, right eating demonstrates a properly ordered relationship of the created being to the Creating Being. Pride and humility are acted out respectively in these two antithetical manners of consuming food. The meal, then, serves as a trustworthy litmus test of the creature’s relationship with the Creator.

Other sins, vices, and struggles may play roles in the incorrect eating practices of a particular individual—avarice and acedia, to name two. Furthermore, biological and physiological matters such as addiction, genetic make-up, and mental or physical disability also complicate the attempt to define what is bad and what is good when it comes to consuming food. Not every act of wrong eating is an instance of a human eating (or not) with one hand while proudly shaking his other at God in a fist; indeed, this kind of bold, intentional act is unlikely. However, my argument is that living into any narrative which is untrue about God and about His creation—a narrative such as the one which Satan propagated to Eve—is prideful, whether or not the human is acting in intentional arrogance towards God. Even with the best intentions, sin is an instance of

misplacing oneself in the grand scheme of creation and with relation to God, and thus, can be broadly construed as prideful.

In what would become the centerpiece of the Jewish religion—namely, the Passover—the Israelites participated in a ritual feast on the eve of their final escape from the oppression of Pharaoh. The annual reenactment of the Feast of the Passover would enter the Jewish calendar as a continual witness to the providence of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Any rebuke of the nation of Israel throughout the Old Testament can typically be traced back to one terrible mistake: the prideful forgetting of God’s plenty, his abundant redemption in bringing his people out of Egypt. When the Israelites correctly observe the Passover, they stand in right relationship to God. Conversely, when they fail to do so, they arrogantly transgress the proper created order and fall short of properly understanding and worshipping the providence of the Father. Along with the archetype of Eve consuming the forbidden fruit, this also demonstrates that better and worse manners of eating can reflect and affect better and worse relation to and worship of God.

Certainly, the practice of eating is not the ultimate end of any person’s spiritual journey; however, it cannot be disregarded. The Church itself is described in terms no less than as Christ’s Body, and its most precious sacrament holds dear the Body and Blood of Christ. To say that Christians care nothing for the body is to say that Christians are not Christians. However, the soul, as the form of the body, is of primary importance—what happens with the body is secondary and thus ordered to the end of spiritual health. Thus, food is not merely a means of keeping the physical body alive and well, but is a means of protecting the health of the soul. Indeed, if the highest

sacramental act of the Church is to eat of the body and blood of Christ, then something intensely spiritual must be involved in eating. What must be explored next is how the Church has responded to the inseparability of body and soul and how it has chosen to enact the spirituality of eating.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Fasting, Feasting, and the Liturgical Narrative

Since the beginnings of the faith, Christians have utilized patterns and rituals as a means of providing a narrative framework by which to shape the life of the believer. A positive construction of what the life of the Christian ought to look like is achieved through the narrative of God and His people: His work in history, and the people's response to Him, a narrative which is communicated primarily through Scripture and is preserved through the traditions and teachings of the Church. The story of God and His people begins not with the birth of Jesus, nor even with the rising up of Moses to save Israel or Abraham's faithful uprooting from the land of Ur; indeed, it extends back through cosmic history to that timeless time when the Creator began to create. Through the set of patterned practices in which the Church engages, Christians embody this narrative of God day after day and year after year; this ritual, of course, is the Christian liturgy.

Two liturgical practices in particular are quite suitable to consider in a quest for the proper Christian manner of eating: fasting and feasting. Though outwardly different, both the fast and the feast embody the same narrative of God's plenty and of creation's dependence on Him. The continual cycle between fasting and feasting serves an important purpose in ordering the life of the Church, and as a result, the lives of the Church's individual members. The primary focus of this order is, of course, on the soul of the believer: is it being brought to greater love of God? All other goods obtained via participation in the liturgical cycle are good order to this end. Because one of the most

apparent embodiments of the narratives behind liturgical fasts and feasts is in what and how one eats, we must look to these two practices for guidance as to the right way a Christian should eat his daily bread.

*Embodied Practices: The Christian Liturgy*

The liturgy is a set of embodied practices which defines the Christian faith and which roots and grounds members of the Body of Christ in particular truths about the nature of God, themselves, and the world. These practices include everything from sacraments such as baptism and Eucharist to the particular words pronounced at certain times during individual worship services, from the annual feast and fast days to the prayers said on a daily basis. The liturgy is Christianity's solution to the fact that body and soul are interconnected. It realizes that doing something time and time again with one's hands and feet, eyes and ears, stomach and mouth and words will inevitably translate a particular story to one's heart and soul. As Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells note in their opening chapter to *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, "the performance of [liturgical] practices shapes the character of Christians and the mind of the Church as a whole."<sup>1</sup>

Individuals engage in liturgical practices only within the wider context of the Church, the Body of Christ. As such, the effects of the liturgy occur at multiple levels: individual, familial, communal, societal, and global. Part of the beauty of the liturgy is its unifying character; on any given Sunday, millions of Christians across the world hear the same lines of Scripture, repeat the same lines of prayer, and go through the same sets

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, "Christian Ethics as Informed Prayer, in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Samuel Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 9.



of practices: the Eucharist, baptism, the reading of Scripture, the hearing of the preached Word, the passing of the peace, and the benediction, just to name a few. Furthermore, the Church worldwide progresses through an annual liturgical calendar which takes the faithful through seasons of sorrow and repentance as well as joy and celebration. Thus, the Church as a whole is formed by the liturgy, even as individuals within it are formed. The liturgy gives life to the Church, and through its faithful recurrence, the liturgy *becomes* the life of the Church. It both informs and reflects the soul of the Body of Christ—both constructs and reveals.

If the liturgy is inherently formative in character, then we must examine exactly to what the Church and its members are being shaped. Rather than measuring Christian life to a religious yardstick, the liturgy invites participants into a narrative: a peculiarly Christian account of God and His creation. Philip Kenneson writes that in these practices, “the *ekklesia* rehearses the story of this triune God, a story that testifies that this God is worthy of our trust and deepest hopes.”<sup>2</sup> In this narrative, God and God alone is responsible for the creation, provision, and salvation of His creatures. The entire created realm owes its very existence to Him, and that existence, by virtue of its Author, is imbued with goodness and beauty. Furthermore, God is the Provider and Sustainer of His people and of His entire creation, the Giver of every good thing who works all things to the good of those who love him.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, God is the victorious Redeemer and Savior of His creation, sacrificing that which was most dear to Him—His only begotten Son—so

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Kenneson, “Gathering: Worship, Imagination, and Formation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. James 1:17; Cf. Romans 8:28.

that His promise to redeem the world from sin and His covenant to make His people a great nation would be fulfilled.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the liturgical narrative is one of a creating, providing, sustaining, and saving God.

The liturgy consists outwardly of human actions and practices which are particularly related to the primary role which the divine plays in this narrative. Kenneson writes of the proper role of humans in the story of the liturgy as answering and responding to the previous work of God:

The gathering of the *ekklesia* for worship is itself a response to God's prior action. The Christian liturgy assumes that God, by virtue of who God is and what God has done, is worthy of praise, adoration, and thanksgiving. Such an assumption has important ethical implications to the extent that the liturgy forms those gathered with a particular orientation or posture toward God, the world, and other people that flows from and is consonant with the *ekklesia's* practice of worship.<sup>5</sup>

As Kenneson recounts it, this posture possesses several significant characteristics:

First, worship cultivates a posture of dependence. It matters enormously for Christian ethics whether human beings see themselves as autonomous and independent of God and each other, or whether they see their lives as gifts from God that in turn might be offered for the life of the world to the glory of God.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, the liturgy embodies a creaturely posture of humility, for "if human beings truly and profoundly are dependent upon God and other people, as Christian worship affirms, then such an affirmation should foster a deep sense of humility."<sup>7</sup> This is the humility of the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread."<sup>8</sup> Lastly, the liturgical narrative is one in which humans respond to the gifts of God with trust in and hope for

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. John 3:16.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneson, 63. Kenneson uses the word *ekklesia* to mean the gathered body of Christian believers—the Church.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 6:11.

the fulfillment of His promises to redeem and ransom His people. The deepest concern of the liturgy is to point to the faithfulness of God in His redemptive plan as borne by and through Jesus Christ and thus to discipline Christians to respond with dependence, humility, trust, and hope to the love and grace of Christ's sacrifice. Through this attention to God's faithful work, the liturgy trains its participants into proper relationship with God. Joel Shuman and Brian Volck remark on what constitutes a creature's proper relationship with the Creator:

Part of what makes any relationship with God 'proper' is acknowledging that we ourselves are creatures, that we owe our very existence to God, and that there's nothing so special about us that we needed to exist in the first place. We live at and for God's pleasure—not that any of us does our job especially well. So learning to be a Christian is, in a sense, learning to see all of life as gift.<sup>9</sup>

Though this narrative concerning Creator and creation is consistent throughout the whole of the liturgy, two practices in particular are pertinent to this present examination of food and eating: feasting and fasting. Despite their starkly contrasting appearances—one rich and festal, the other somber and lean—both the feast and the fast are practices of eating and relating to food which embody the same liturgical narrative of God's creating, providing, sustaining, and saving love. Both are occasions to live into and live out the story of God. Feasts and fasts are certainly not everyday occurrences, and, in fact, Christians spend the majority of the annual liturgical cycle in what is known as "ordinary time"—the ordered time of the everyday. However, we can understand that the ways in which these two "extraordinary" practices posture the creature towards the alimentary gifts of God so as to enable a similar posture towards the redemptive gifts of God. The special occasions of the feast and the fast train the creature in the same narrative, a story

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<sup>9</sup> Joel Shuman and Brian Volck, *Reclaiming the Body: Christians and the Faithful Use of Modern Medicine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 44.

which has the power to engage the everyday meals—the time between the special days—in a transformative manner.

*A Holy Abstinence: The Christian Fast*

The liturgical fast informs the Christian imagination with this story about the character of God and about His relationship with His creation. The abstinence from food which is the chief outward marker of this religious practice never accounts for its final goal. Rather, the fast is greatly concerned with inviting the Church as a whole and the individual believers which make up the Church into a narrative in which God is the ultimate Provider and Sustainer, or in the words of L. Juliana M. Claassens, in which God is “a God who feeds.”<sup>10</sup> Claassens argues that even in biblical accounts of famine, events of which the abstinence and material lack of fasting are mirrors, the people of God “firmly held on to the belief that God would feed again.”<sup>11</sup>

Central to the lessons of the fast is the necessary narrative about humans which accompanies a view of God as an all-powerful giver of life: people are not their own creators, providers, sustainers, or indeed, saviors. This joins the practice of fasting with the innate humility of the liturgical narrative. The creature, deprived of food, is compelled to reflect on the multi-faceted providence of God and to respond to his Creator’s benevolence with humility, gratitude, trust, and dependence. Mary Louise Bringle cites St. Augustine who, in his work *On the Usefulness of Fasting*, remarks on this response which the fasting narrative requires: “When people are hungry, they stretch

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<sup>10</sup> L. Juliana M. Claassens, *The God Who Provides: Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), xv.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

out toward something; while they are stretching, they are enlarged; while they are enlarged, they become capacious, and when they have become capacious enough, they will be filled in due time.”<sup>12</sup> The purpose of fasting is to induce a material hunger within the Christian which he is obliged to consider metaphorically as his spiritual hunger. In a proper response, he will take on a more humble posture towards the alimentary gifts of God (having abstained from them during his fast) as well as towards the spiritual provisions of God: salvation and hope in Jesus Christ. When the fast is over, the Christian might eat with a better attitude than he had previously done, and furthermore, he might accept the work of Christ with a more humble attitude than before. Bringle affirms this idea, writing that “perhaps more than any other practice of self-discipline, fasting reminds of us of our radical dependence” on the material and spiritual providence of God amidst the brokenness of our sin.<sup>13</sup> Scot McKnight writes that “fasting is body turning from sin to faithful devotion from God”; fasting enacts the creaturely reliance on God to feed the hunger of our soul which sin leaves.<sup>14</sup>

Bringle, among others, emphasizes the importance of understanding fasting over against any gnostic tendencies. By her definition, gnosticism “represents an attempt to achieve...salvation through a flight from the disgusting encumbrance of the physical body.”<sup>15</sup> As some members of the ascetic and monastic movements proved, the practice of abstaining from food in order to achieve greater holiness and greater communion with

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Louise Bringle, *The God of Thinness: Gluttony and Other Weighty Matters* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 41.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Scot McKnight, *Fasting* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 36.

<sup>15</sup> Bringle, 23.

God can, if undertaken without the properly humble narrative in mind, quickly devolve into an exercise of shunning the physical body. As noted in the first chapter, this mistake, though easily made, does not cohere with the correct Christian view concerning the body. In the insistent words of Bringle, “Christian theology, once relieved of its Gnostic propensities, locates the sacred *not* in some remote seventh heaven, but rather here on earth: in the flesh of the incarnation, in the body and blood of bread and wine, in the table fellowship of those whose common cause is to feed the God embodied within ‘the least of these.’”<sup>16</sup> The intended message of the fast is not that food is evil; rather, as Bringle notes, “the wisdom of the scriptural position appears [in the words of Chrysostom] in a hearty affirmation that all God’s creations are good, if received with the proper attitude.”<sup>17</sup>

Rather, fasting must preserve the mindset that while spiritual things are of primary importance, fleshly things, including food, matter as well. To draw from Bringle once more, the faithful practice of fasting must recognize that “from a Christian perspective, all these things matter profoundly: not just for their personal poignancy, but also for their rich theological resonance with the grounding symbols and sacraments of the faith.”<sup>18</sup> Abstinence which becomes too extreme, albeit in the name of holiness, must realign itself with the narrative which the liturgy teaches. Not only are humans not their own material providers, as taught by the literal abstaining from food; they are also not the sustainers or sources of their own sanctification, as demonstrated by the danger of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 23. Emphasis in original.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 28.

pharisaical pride in one's own righteous deeds. "Genuine asceticism," Bringle affirms, "does not seek to kill the passions but rather to learn from them and lift them to great wholeness and holiness."<sup>19</sup>

*Bread of Heaven: A Scriptural Pattern for Trust and Humility in Fasting*

Unsurprisingly, fasting receives a great deal of attention within the Scriptures. Among many important instances of the fast in the Bible are the following: Old Testament prophets such as Elijah and kings such as David often fasted; Daniel and his companions ate a strict, fast-like diet in the court of Nebuchadnezzar; Jesus fasted in the desert for forty days at the beginning of His ministry; but Jesus also warned His followers against a kind of wrong fasting which was arrogant like the Pharisees.<sup>20</sup> Grumett and Muers note that the Christian practice of fasting must be understood "as a gradual transformation of Jewish fasting."<sup>21</sup> As such, we can take as a particularly rich scriptural paradigm for the liturgical fast the instance of the Israelites' fasting upon manna during their wandering in the wilderness.<sup>22</sup> By Claassen's account, nothing surpasses this heaven-sent provision as "central to Israel's understanding of the metaphor of the God who feeds."<sup>23</sup> The narrative of this event given in the sixteenth chapter of Exodus depicts a bitter and hungry people who "complained against Moses and Aaron" (and by

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. 1 Kings 17:3-7; Cf. 2 Samuel 12:16-7; Cf. Daniel 1:8-19; Cf. Matthew 4:1-11; Cf. Luke 18:12.

<sup>21</sup> David Grumett and Rachel Muers, *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, meat, and Christian diet* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Exodus 16:1-36.

<sup>23</sup> Claassens, 1.

extension, God), insisting that it would have been better to die “by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt,” where they at least were able to eat meat and bread to their content.<sup>24</sup> The Lord, listening to the resentful cries of the people, promised Moses: “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.”<sup>25</sup>

The next day, God faithfully provided nourishment for the people. Claassens observes that three miraculous occurrences surround the divine gift of manna:

In the first miracle, the people find that the manna they have gathered is equal in amount for each person. [...] The second miracle is that manna is only found six days a week and not on the Sabbath, [...] emphasizing that God makes special arrangements for a special day. [...] The third miracle is that, in contrast to the other days in which manna could not be stored successfully, the extra manna for the Sabbath does not go foul.<sup>26</sup>

Despite God’s specific directions regarding the amounts of manna to be gathered per person, His command that no extra should be hoarded overnight, and His rule that no manna was to be gathered on the Sabbath, the Israelites proved to still harbor distrust towards their Sustainer.<sup>27</sup> When some avariciously collected more than their allotted share, they found “those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed.”<sup>28</sup> Those who attempted to hoard a portion of their share overnight found that “it bred worms and

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<sup>24</sup> Exodus 16:2-3.

<sup>25</sup> Exodus 16:4.

<sup>26</sup> Claassens, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Exodus 16:5, 16-20, 22-9.

<sup>28</sup> Exodus 16:18.



became foul”; naturally, “Moses was angry with them.”<sup>29</sup> The audacious few who “went out to gather” on the Sabbath... found none” and met the disdain of the Lord:

How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The Lord has given you the Sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.<sup>30</sup>

Even with the miracle of manna in their hands, the nation of Israel seemed loath to place full confidence in the faithfulness of God to His word. While a sharp and deep hunger surely pained the bellies of the Israelites, even to the point of longing for Egypt as a place of plenty and comfort, a deeper problem seems to be the cause of such intense distrust of the Lord. Why not believe the Almighty One when he promised nourishment? Certainly the One who had visited ten devastating plagues upon the oppressors of His people and who miraculously parted the waters of the Red Sea could be counted upon to dependably provide daily bread.

What seems to have truly troubled the house of Israel was an abiding fear that God had given up on them as a nation, abandoning them to die in the desert and never to taste the milk and honey of the Promised Land upon their palates.<sup>31</sup> The root problem of the Israelites’ attitude towards “the Lord your God, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, who brought you up out of Egypt” was precisely that the character of God—so clearly conveyed in this designation—had slipped their memory. These people, despite the spectacular divine provision which they had witnessed in the grand escape from Egypt, had forgotten that their God was one of sustenance, abundance, and redemption.

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<sup>29</sup> Exodus 16:20.

<sup>30</sup> Exodus 16:27-9

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Exodus 3:8.

Their misgivings about the manna were but a mirror of their cynicism about the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant to make their nation great on the earth.

The proper response of the Israelites to the gift of manna would have been humble obedience to and dependence on God and acceptance of His benevolence on His terms. Similarly, the right attitude of the people of Israel towards their redemption out of Egypt by the Lord God would have been humble obedience to and dependence on God and acceptance of His grace on His terms—the laws and commands which He communicated to his people through Moses. Furthermore, the Israelites ought to have believed unwaveringly that God would remain faithful to His covenant to the descendants of Abraham.<sup>32</sup> Clearly, the response of the Israelites to their manna mirrors their relationship with their covenant and with their God.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God's provision of manna is recalled as a poignant reminder of the Lord's faithfulness to His people despite their constant rebellion:

Yet he commanded the skies above,  
And opened the doors of heaven;  
he rained down on them manna to eat,  
and gave them the grain of heaven.  
Mortals ate of the bread of angels;  
he sent them food in abundance.<sup>33</sup>

Through exiles and prophets, rebellions and more exiles and more prophets, faithful Israelites pointed back to God's provision of nourishment in the desert as paradigmatic of the continual unfolding of His plan of redemption. As the chief symbol informing the Israelite imagination concerning the divine character, the story of manna also holds great

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-21.

<sup>33</sup> Psalm 78:23-25.

significance for Christians as a metaphor for the continuity of God's providence in salvation history. For Christians who understand Jesus Christ to be the fulfillment of the covenant with Israel, the symbol of manna, then, cannot be ignored. Christ, teaching His disciples to know Him as the "the bread of life," said: "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."<sup>34</sup>

If an insufficiency of trust necessitated Israel's forced fasting upon manna, then surely a person engaging in a proper fast can learn from the manna's lesson of humble trust in divine providence.<sup>35</sup> Bringle notes that "fasting makes us feel in our guts (both literally and metaphorically) the reality of suffering and the brokenness of a world in which starvation coexists with supersatiation."<sup>36</sup> The fast can rid the human creature of an inordinate love of material, simultaneously making the soul deeply aware of its sin, drawing it to repentance and trimming it into a form more open to accept the grace of God with appropriate humility. The attentiveness and discipline of fasting is necessary for Christians in order to more clearly participate in the will of God, rather than being governed by their own sinful will.

#### *A Rhythm of Repentance: The Liturgical Fast*

Liturgical fasts are observed by the entire body of believers in order to foster a communal recognition of the need for repentance from the stain of original sin; thus, it is

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<sup>34</sup> John 6:32-33, 35.

<sup>35</sup> Bringle, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 48.

appropriate to define a liturgical fast as fundamentally outward-facing and community-fostering. Proper fasts may occur individually in time and in space, but they do not occur outside the reaches of the Church. Even though the individual Christian who abstains from food participates in intense self-examination and introspection, the end of this discipline is not finally towards the individual, but rather towards an examination of how he can be better aligned with God, his Creator, Sustainer, and Savior. Thus, this looking inward is only an instrumental good in the pursuit of the one intrinsic good. The individual engaged in fasting would be remiss to stop at individual reflection and examination; he has then lost track of the telos of fasting and is now merely dieting, rather than focusing on the wider narrative into which he fits. The one who “fasts alone,” isolated from the community, runs the risk of dividing the body and of becoming conceitedly fixated on himself.

The great fast of Lent, the most significant period of fasting in the Christian calendar, lasts forty days, a length meant to reflect Christ’s forty days of fasting in the desert following His baptism, as well as other significant periods in Jewish-Christian history such as the great flood of forty days’ length and the Hebrews’ forty years wandering in the wilderness. While facing Satan during that period of testing, Christ resisted the allure of self-sufficiency and self-provision, battling down a trio of temptations which seemed to promise such goods.<sup>37</sup> By the accounts of Matthew and Luke (Mark’s brief mention of the event is a scant pair of verses, and John does not include it all in his gospel), Jesus was first tempted to transform stones into bread. The two Evangelists transpose the second and third temptations, but do account for them

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4: 1-13.

almost word for word: that Jesus throw Himself down from “the pinnacle of the temple” and that He worship Satan in exchange for “all the kingdoms of the world.”<sup>38</sup>

All three are temptations for Jesus to assert Himself as “his own man” and “to pull himself up by his own bootstraps,” to use a couple of equivalent modern colloquialisms. However, the first test is particularly interesting to this present consideration of how a fast might correct a problematic attitude towards food. Even though Jesus is unquestionably divine, He is also unquestionably human. Therefore, His ordeal demonstrates to human creatures (ones who are not also part of the Holy Trinity, at that) that to accept the devil’s temptation to seize food for oneself is to affirm the illusion that humans have the ability to create and sustain themselves apart from the benevolent intervention of God. Christ’s example teaches the humility towards and dependence upon divine providence which is embodied in the liturgical narrative.

As it is observed now, the Lenten season embodies a period of intentional waiting for the culmination of Christ’s work on the Cross. The preparation for Holy Week requires an intense repentance of original sin and a deep recognition of human inability to provide for oneself materially, much less spiritually, and thus embodies the humble dependence inculcated by the liturgy’s narrative. The great fast begins with the liturgy of Ash Wednesday, which echoes the curse pronounced upon the earth following the fall of man: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”<sup>39</sup> These words weigh heavy with the reality of human mortality and insufficiency, reminding believers of their absolute dependence on the grace of their Creator.

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<sup>38</sup> Luke 4:9; Luke 4:5.

<sup>39</sup> Genesis 3:19.

The prolonged season of repentance in Lent culminates in the darkest day of the Christian year: Good Friday. On this somber day, Christians mark the day on which Christ was brutally crucified for the world's sin upon the Cross. During Good Friday, Christians repent with ultimate sorrow for the suffering and death of their beloved Savior and participates in a communal recognition of their own culpability in the greatest horror ever committed—the cruel crucifixion of the only perfect creature who ever to live upon the earth. Horrified, the congregation finds that its many voices join with the crowd—indeed, finds that it *is* the crowd—crying, “Crucify Him!” Perhaps never more than on this day ought humans mourn their insufficiency before their God; never more than on this day should they respond to His abundant gifts with humility.

Given all this, we can see how the liturgical fast is a properly Christian way of relating to and consuming food. By requiring that humans abstain from food and welcome hunger, the fast embodies a story in which God alone provides for human well-being, both materially (in providing food) and spiritually (in providing salvation through Jesus Christ). In this way, it aligns with the broad narrative of the liturgy which ritually enacts the Good News that God is the God who creates good and beautiful things, sustains and provides that which He creates, and redeems that which He creates. It also conveys the Gospel claim that His human creatures ought respond to his goodness and overabundant provision with a posture of humility, dependence, trust, and gratitude. Through the discipline of aching hunger, the Christian learns to repent of the sin which leaves a void in his soul and to turn towards the God who redeems that sin. Hunger demonstrates the human need for God to provide food, and the Christian learns to use this as a reminder of the human need for God to provide salvation. Thus, we see our first

example of how an embodied liturgical practice translates a particular narrative about God and His creation into the human soul.

*Proclaiming and Celebrating Divine Providence: The Christian Feast*

At the other end of the liturgical spectrum from fasting, yet still pointing towards the same liturgical narrative, is the practice of feasting. According to Bringle, the feast days of the Church are defined in order “to regularize and ritualize the practice of rejoicing in the present, palpable, and palatable graces of God.”<sup>40</sup> This rhythm of celebration is the crucial counterpart of the rhythm of fasting and repentance which is required amidst the reality of sin. Indeed, the feast can be seen as a type of training for the new heaven and the new earth: we must discipline ourselves to delight in a redeemed creation, free from the sin which necessitates sackcloth, ashes, and abstinence from food. Jesus instructs the disciples of John that fasting is for “the days when the bridegroom is taken away,” whereas “wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them.”<sup>41</sup> While liturgical fast days immerse the Body of Christ into confession of and contrition for sin, liturgical feast days proclaim the triumph of the Gospel over sin. Indeed, the eternal marriage feast of the Lamb, and not the fast of the waiting and watching bridesmaids, will have the final word in the coming Order.<sup>42</sup>

Though distinctly triumphant, the practice of feasting is still one of fundamental humility, for the victory belongs not to any human, but to God. The feasting creature celebrates the victory of their Lord as the Creator of a good creation, the Provider of

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<sup>40</sup> Bringle, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew 9:15.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Revelation 19:7, 9.

everything needed by that creation, the Sustainer of the creation throughout history, and the Savior and Redeemer of creation into the coming kingdom of God. Along with this celebration is the absolute recognition of humans' continuing insufficiency: they have not created these things for themselves. And yet, Christians can properly rejoice because God has invited them to participate in a community-forming narrative which centers around a banquet of bread and of wine—the body and blood of Christ. This is a responsive rejoicing: we are the ragamuffins gathered from the streets to partake in the great wedding banquet of the Son.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the triune God is host to the feast of creation.

Like the liturgical fast, the liturgical feast is also an intrinsically communal act. A Christian individual does not feast alone, because his chief motivation is not the consumption of food. Rather, he feasts along with the Church in order to embody a story about the Creator. Indeed, the festal meal is absurd unless enjoyed by a group of people; think of how many people we gather to ourselves at holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Feasting points one's attention away from the inner desires and passions and outward to the community of believers who claim the truth about God's character as Provider

Furthermore, feasting is fundamentally creation-affirming. In it, the liturgy affords us an occasion to join with God in His affirmation of creation: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."<sup>44</sup> For Christians, this pronouncement is even more significant, for they proclaim that creation is not only good by virtue of its origin, but also good by virtue of its redemption. The greatest feast day,

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Luke 14:15:24.

<sup>44</sup> Genesis 1:31.



Resurrection Sunday, allows us to proclaim this truth over the entire material world, and thus has something very important to say about food—a very material reality indeed. Indeed, the feasting narrative has the power to redeem even our most problematic attitudes towards food.

However, many modern Christian individuals often fail to perceive how an activity which involves eating—indeed, eating *abundantly*—could realign the waywardness of a soul. Bringle makes an observation about this failure:

The fact that we do not ordinarily think of feasting as a spiritual discipline shows how seriously our understandings have been distorted by a puritanical distrust of pleasure and a gnostic focus on ‘other-worldly’ asceticism. But if ‘to discipline’ means... ‘to become a disciple,’ then *Christian* discipline enjoins us to enjoy the creation.<sup>45</sup>

Neither the body’s necessity nor its enjoyment of food possess an inherently tainted nature that excludes them as means towards holiness; Gregory of Nyssa makes this clear when he writes: “The body merely gives a sign that there is need of nourishment; it is [human] will that perverts [this] need.”<sup>46</sup> So then, any suspicion that the materialism of a feast bars it from status as a mode of spiritual discipline is quite unfounded, for as Robert Farrar Capon so wonderfully puts it:

It was God who invented dirt, onions, and turnip greens [...] And it is God’s unrelenting love of all the stuff of this world that keeps it in being at every moment. [...] we are made in the image of the Ultimate Materialist.<sup>47</sup>

“As long as God is not frugal about being,” Capon writes, “I see no point in eating stingily.”<sup>48</sup> The creation-affirming characteristic of feasting is precisely what draws the

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<sup>45</sup> Bringle, 47.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Reflection* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), xxvi.

soul back towards its proper end, for to celebrate that which has been created is to celebrate the One who has created it. The one who cannot feast has succumbed, intentionally or unintentionally, to the fallacy of boredom with and indifference towards the most remarkable gift which was ever bestowed upon an undeserving recipient. God has given the gift not only of creation (as if this were not enough), but also of an extravagant plan of redemption for what humans, through their sin, failed to preserve in that creation. Intense gratitude and humility typify the liturgical feast, and certainly the proper practice of the feast can bring healing to a soul made sick by sin by training the participant to celebrate the overabundant grace of God and His victory over death and sin.

*The Passover and the Eucharist: Paradigms of Liturgical Feasting*

Imagery of alimentary abundance abounds within the sacred pages of Scripture; indeed, food and eating are among the most frequent symbols in the entire Bible. Their high rate of incidence alone makes a strong case for the significance of food as both a literal and metaphorical element in the narrative of God's providence throughout history. One scriptural account of feasting in particular exemplifies what I have argued to be the primary agenda of this liturgical practice—that is, that God is Creator, Sustainer, Provider, and Savior, and that conversely, humans are none of these things for themselves and therefore must humbly, trustingly, and gratefully depend on the Father for their salvation and their very existence.

This is the great feast of the Passover, the earliest liturgical feast accounted for in the Scriptures. Just as the fasting upon manna in the desert typifies the fast in the Judeo-

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 151.

Christian narrative, so does this “day of remembrance” epitomize the feast.<sup>49</sup> The observance marks the last night of Israel’s slavery under the Egyptians when God caused death to pass over the houses of the Israelites, sparing the children of His people while “[striking] down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals,” a catastrophe which spurred Pharaoh’s release of the Hebrew people from their slavery.<sup>50</sup> Per the Lord’s instructions to Moses, the Israelites were to “celebrate [the Passover] as a festival to the Lord,” observing it “throughout [their] generations...as a perpetual ordinance.”<sup>51</sup>

In the religious imagination of the Jewish people, the annual observance of the eve of salvation typified a liturgy focused on celebrating the providential character of God. “The Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” became a second-nature appellation for the Lord, and the particular provision of the Passover came to be identified as inclusive of all of God’s material and spiritual providence throughout history.<sup>52</sup> In the account of the first Passover given in the book of Exodus, a cause-and-effect correlation is drawn multiple times between the salvific activity and redemptive nature of God and the festal, liturgical activities of God’s people. Instructing Moses, the Lord declares: “You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, *for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt.*”<sup>53</sup> Moses, speaking to the elders of Israel, predicts the inquiries of children about the meanings of

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<sup>49</sup> Exodus 12:14.

<sup>50</sup> Exodus 12:12.

<sup>51</sup> Exodus 12:14.

<sup>52</sup> Exodus 20:2.

<sup>53</sup> Exodus 12:17. Emphasis added.

the Passover observances and furnishes the older generation with a catechismal response that again looks back to when the Lord “passed over the house of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.”<sup>54</sup> Addressing this time the entire nation, Moses again reiterates that nothing inspires this new religious observance other than the activity of the divine: “Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten.”<sup>55</sup>

While the Passover was fundamentally motivated by the identification and recognition of the God of Israel as the God who *saved* Israel, it also functioned to distinguish to the nation in a very particular way. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was not merely an annual event on the national calendar, but a characteristic practice which articulated the very identity of the people as a whole. They were not just the Israelites, but the Israelites with whom God had preserved His covenant by faithfully redeeming them from bondage in Egypt. The festival narrative was to become intrinsic to the very life of the Israelites; this practice of the Passover functioned to name them as a people. To solidify the festival as a unique feature of the people of God, the Lord commanded that no “foreigner” or “uncircumcised person shall eat of it.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the Passover was to become as identifying, and indeed as bodily, a marker as circumcision. As the installation of the practice of circumcision and God’s giving of the covenant to Abraham were concurrent, so is the mark of the Passover a covenantal identifier—indeed, a birthmark. Thus, when the Israelites kept the Passover properly, they were in right

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<sup>54</sup> Exodus 12:27.

<sup>55</sup> Exodus 13:3.

<sup>56</sup> Exodus 12:43, 48.

relationship with God, understanding Him properly as the great Provider, Redeemer, and Savior while also understanding themselves properly as a people radically dependent Him God for provision, redemption, and salvation.

Thousands of years after the Lord ransomed the Hebrews from their slavery to the Egyptians, the Passover feast, or the festival of Unleavened Bread was still being faithfully observed in Jerusalem, even under Roman rule. One particular year, when “came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed,” Jesus arranged to observe the festal meal with His disciples.<sup>57</sup> During that meal, the last before His death, Jesus inaugurated what is now the most cherished sacrament of Christianity:

He took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”<sup>58</sup>

Christ’s words of institution transformed the humble meal of bread and wine, two of the most earthy, elemental foods imaginable, into a vessel of the grace conveyed by the redemptive sacrifice of His body—the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. In fact, He spoke of the consumption of His body and blood in terms of literal eating, teaching that “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”<sup>59</sup>

Contained within the Eucharist is the weight of God’s covenant with His people, which for thousands of years was so vividly embodied in the Passover feast. In Egypt, the Lord had rescued His people by passing over their children when death had visited

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<sup>57</sup> Luke 22:7.

<sup>58</sup> Mark 14:22-24.

<sup>59</sup> John 6:56.

every other firstborn in the land. However, in the Eucharist, we find that the Passover was just one part of the story—the story which culminates with the blood of the Spotless Lamb covering a cross, rather than the blood of a lamb sprinkled on a doorpost. Christ’s institution of the Eucharist signaled that the ancient covenant had been fulfilled once and for all; humanity had been ransomed from their slavery to sin, and death had not only passed over, but had itself been defeated.

For Christians, the bread and the cup of the Eucharistic table exemplify proper eating. The fruits of the earth are consumed, but neither for the subtle sweetness of the bread nor for the burning richness of the wine. Rather, in the Eucharistic moment more than any other in human experience, food is consumed for the sake of pointing towards and embodying the true narrative of a creating, sustaining, and saving God. The bread and the wine proclaim that God is creating “all things new,” that He sustains us until Christ comes again, and that He has saved us in conquering sin by the blood of His perfect Lamb.<sup>60</sup> In response, participants in the liturgy of the Eucharist can respond only humbly and gratefully to the abundant outpouring from God. Indeed, this is the pinnacle of proper Christian feasting.

### *The Gospel Triumph of the Liturgical Feast*

Like the liturgy of its Jewish ancestry, the Christian liturgy sets aside multiple feast days a year to celebrate the story of a God who extravagantly provides for his people. The liturgical feast insists that the gifts of God are a grace, freely given in love and neither earned nor deserved by their recipients. Furthermore, the creatures upon

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Revelation 21:5; Cf. 1 Corinthians 11:26; Cf. Revelation 12:11.

whom creation is bestowed are not entitled to possess the creation, much less to control, manipulate or commoditize it.

Specific feast days celebrate with rightly ordered rejoicing the providence of God as shown on various occasions throughout history. The Feast of the Annunciation, which recognizes Mary's revelation from Gabriel that she was to bear the Messiah, celebrates God's provision of a Redeemer in the Word made flesh. Pentecost commemorates the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. Various saints' days give thanks for the divine providence of a cloud of witnesses for the edification and guidance of the Body of Christ.

The two greatest feasts of the Christian calendar honor the two greatest events in God's redemptive work: the birth of Christ at Christmastide, and His resurrection at Easter. Christ is the ultimate realization of the festal narrative begun in the Passover observance; He is the perfect fulfillment of God's faithfulness to the covenant which he made with Abraham and preserved in Egypt and in the wilderness. The Christmas liturgy honors the birth of the Savior with unbridled enthusiasm:

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined. [...]  
For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us; [...]  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.<sup>61</sup>

A star shining in the East guides even those outside of Israel to the infant Savior's side.<sup>62</sup>

The aged Simeon lifts a humble and grateful song to the Lord—"my eyes have seen your salvation"—and we sing with him "joy to the Lord" because the "Lord has come" in

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<sup>61</sup> Isaiah 9:2, 6.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Matthew 2:1-10.

Emmanuel.<sup>63</sup> At Christmastime, Christians celebrate the story of God as Ultimate Provider in His gift of the Messiah promised from the very beginning.

Easter, the greatest Christian feast, also celebrates the divine redemption of humanity, delighting in God's completion of His covenantal work. Like the Passover (and indeed, like all other liturgical observances), the work of God inspires and motivates the actions of the people in this festal observance. Christ's death ransomed humanity from the slavery sin, and therefore, they celebrate His triumph over death.

Perhaps at no other time in the Christian calendar does one feel so powerfully the necessity of both fasting and feasting as in the turn from Good Friday to Resurrection Sunday. That dark day of the Crucifixion concludes with the closing of church doors behind solemn congregants, thundering shut in the silence of a sanctuary vacant save for extinguished candles and the lingering echoes of Christ's final words: "It is finished."<sup>64</sup> Stomachs ache with a forty-day hunger; souls ache with the recognition of an age-old stain of sin. The human creature is brought low on Good Friday, even as the Savior of humanity is raised up on a cross of death, only to be taken down six hours later—only to descend into the depths of Hell. For the Christian thoroughly invested in the rhythms of the liturgy, there is perhaps no humbler moment; here is no place for the prideful illusion of self-creation, self-sufficiency, and self-salvation.

Rays of sun break across those same church doors as they are pushed open into an Easter morning sanctuary which seems to radiate with light. Bright, white linen takes the place of rough, gray drapes, and lilies bloom where the barren twigs of Lent once presided. Mingling with the last strains of smoke from Good Friday candles are ecstatic

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<sup>63</sup> Luke 2:30; the popular Christmas hymn, "Joy to the World"; Cf. Matthew 1:23.

<sup>64</sup> John 19:30.



proclamations: “Christ is risen; He is risen indeed!” Hungry, thirsty bodies are nourished with the feast of the Eucharist, and later filled with the delights of tables heaped high with beautifully cooked foods and of fellowship strengthened by shared victory. Souls which have spent three days in the tomb with Christ are raised again to new life; having reached the point of utter emptiness, they stand ready to be filled to overflowing with an abundant and extravagant salvation.

This feast day is the centerpiece of the Christian calendar: its message and the heart of the entire faith. On Easter Sunday, the Church proclaims that the Author of Salvation could have written no more perfect ending for His grand narrative. God, through the worth and work of Christ, has made the ultimate provision for a sinful people, and He has remained utterly faithful to His covenant to make the children of Abraham a great blessing to all nations. Though the outward appearances of the liturgical feast are in stark contrast to the somber, repentant, hungering mood of the liturgical fast, it too works to instill a particular narrative in the imagination of the Church, a story which, once learned in the liturgy, will go on to inform the everyday life practices of individuals. This common story is that of Jehovah-Jireh: the God who provided the ultimate sacrifice in order to fulfill His covenant His creation.<sup>65</sup>

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Bringle writes: “The ways that I am in my body both ground and reflect the ways that I am in my spirit and in the world.”<sup>66</sup> The micronarratives of the liturgical practices of fasting and feasting mirror the macronarrative of God and His relationship with His

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<sup>65</sup> Genesis 22:8, 11-18.

<sup>66</sup> Bringle, 16.

people. The former abstains from food in order to realize the deep human dependence upon God for provision of not just the material goods of creation, but ultimately, for salvation from sin; the latter, characterized by an abundance of food on tables and great joy in hearts, celebrates the completion of God's covenantal work in the history of humanity. Both practices, being disciplines of the body which reach into the realm of the spirit, have the power to influence the soul in a better order towards its Creator. Because eating which takes place within the liturgical framework is not pursued for eating's own sake, but rather for the sake of proclaiming the true narrative about God, practices of everyday eating patterned after the liturgical narrative are properly Christian ways of relating to food.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Antithetical Narrative of Wrong Eating

After constructing a positive account of the proper Christian attitude towards food as informed by the scriptural and liturgical narratives, this thesis now turns its attention towards examining the two poles of problematic eating which occur especially in the modern world: over-eating (or gluttony) and under- or not-eating. It is appropriate for the account of right eating to precede the account of wrong eating, for by the Christian account, sin has no existence of its own, being only a privation of something good.<sup>1</sup> By this definition of improper action as *privatio boni*, one can posit that inappropriate over-eating or gluttony is a perversion of proper feasting, while improper under-eating or not-eating are both perversions of proper fasting. Whereas the attitudes towards eating offered by the liturgy are intrinsically humble, trusting, and dependent on the Creator, the respective privations of these have at their core pride towards and distrust of God's provision for His creation. Because Christians believe that anything apart from the true and good is insubstantial, it makes sense, then, to discuss improper attitudes only as they corrupt proper ones.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I will explore both extremes of incorrect eating as they contrast with the balanced Christian treatments of food, demonstrating that whether one is eating too much or eating too little, one may be in danger of negatively affecting

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this doctrine is articulated by St. Augustine in Book VII, Chapters XII-XV of his *Confessions*. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., translated by F. J. Sheed, edited by Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

one's spiritual state through pride and distrust, thus abandoning the proper liturgical life of God and His good creation.

### *The Narrative of Improper Eating*

As shown in the first chapter, this thesis works under the assumption that bodily practices and habits possess an integral correlation to and a profound influence on the state of the soul. In light of this belief, the benefit, and even the necessity, of the Christian liturgy shines clearly. The rhythmic sequence of the Christian calendar, from the grand annual cycle right down to the daily hours, forms the soul by involving the body in a rich narrative framework which tells the story of a Creator God who sustains and saves His creation in material ways (such as through the provision of food) and, ultimately, by redeeming it through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The individual who surrenders himself to participation in the liturgy will begin to find this narrative imprinted on every surface of his soul.

Unfortunately, just as the positive embodied practices of the Christian liturgy have the power to shape the soul towards better participation in the divine life, so are negative practices and habits able to form the soul for the worse. Just as liturgical activities relate particular stories, so do all human activities, including sinful ones. Improper eating of all kinds embodies a narrative framework which is antithetical to that of Christian liturgical practices. Recall the hypothesis presented in the first chapter: if proper eating is a humble act on the part of the creature, then improper eating is an inherently prideful human behavior. The narrative of improper eating directly opposes the narrative of the both the feast and the fast. Where the liturgy tells a story about the work of a creating, sustaining, and redeeming God in His creation, over-eating and under-

or not-eating narrate a story that man, in having absolute power over creation, is free to fill his body in whatever manner his desires and passions dictate. Wrong eating testifies to a narrative in which creatures are not dependent on God and proudly grasp at creation as their own; it is man's assertion of his right over the material realm (both within and without the body) to coerce and control however he pleases.

For the template of this destructive narrative which improper eating embodies, we can look to the most primal vice of all: the fall of man. Adam and Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit was briefly treated in the first chapter as an archetype of improper eating, and that discussion will be expanded here. The taking of the forbidden fruit was a gluttonous act, extending past the boundaries of prescribed eating—boundaries which were certainly nothing to complain about, as Genesis records that in the garden, “the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the goodness of Eden is described in terms of its very edibility, and one can appreciate that the first two humans certainly lacked nothing material in their blessed primitive state. This material plenitude was both literal and symbolic; the physical reality of the abundance which Eden offered certainly points towards the reality of the spiritual plenty which Adam and Eve enjoyed in their pre-cursed condition. The Scriptures imply that the couple freely enjoyed the physical presence of God, even being able to hear “the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden,” and took pleasure in natural communion with their Creator.<sup>4</sup> In the light of His generous providence of a perfect creation for their enjoyment, Adam and Eve had every reason to submit to the Lord's single command to

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:9.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:8.

not eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and had no reason at all to distrust His apparent love and care.

Despite what should have been the case, Eve, followed by her husband, ignored the love and grace which God had unquestionably proven through His actions, succumbing to a fatal suggestion from the serpent, the craftiest of all the wild animals which God had created.<sup>5</sup> With one cunning question, the serpent cast suspicion over all of God's obvious provision: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"<sup>6</sup> This seemingly innocent inquiry after factual information masked a devilish challenge to the divine command. In the same breath in which he employed words which cloaked his true meaning, the serpent implicitly accused God of doing the same: giving a command under one pretense while really having ulterior motives.

Just a few moments later, the serpent answered Eve's assertion that she and her husband will surely die if they eat of the fruit by revealing his suppositions about God's *real* purposes in preventing Adam and Eve from tasting the fruit of the tree: "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."<sup>7</sup> Here, the snake directly opposed the word of God, and furthermore, accused God of forbidding the fruit simply because His pride prevented Him from allowing any creature to become like Him. (Never mind that no made creature could ever be like the unmade Creator.) The serpent accused God of pride, when in fact God is the one Being incapable of pride: not only is He completely good and free of sin, but He is also that than which there is no greater. If pride is the wrongful assertion of

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 3:1.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3:1.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 3:4-5.

higher position than one truly occupies or deserves, how could God possibly be culpable of it? And yet the serpent accused Him of it. The irony of the implicit charge was that pride—the unwillingness for someone to be equal to or greater than him—warranted Satan (who Christians equate with the serpent) his expulsion from heaven. Thus, in this awful twisting of reality, the serpent incorrectly names everything, accusing God of everything that he himself is guilty of.

Before the serpent introduced his horrible suggestion, Eve had no reason to suppose that there was anything lacking in either the material or spiritual dimensions of her existence. However, once the cloven tongue had spoken terrible words of insinuation, she bought into the illusion that God was somehow holding out on her: not only had something materially good been withheld from her, but she had not been given her full spiritual potential. Faced with this lie, Eve fell victim to pride, and wrongfully asserted herself above the order lovingly and providentially established by her Creator. Her wrong eating caused her to overstep a physical boundary of consuming the forbidden fruit; her correlative pride caused her to overstep her creaturely boundaries in trying to be like the inimitable Author of creation.

Another Old Testament story gives a model of how incorrect eating correlates with a prideful attitude towards God: the story of the manna in the desert. This story served as a paradigm of proper fasting in the second chapter; however, by examining how some of the Israelites improperly received the gift of the manna and refused to play by the rules when it came to gathering and eating it, we can also glean an important lesson about practices of eating which are out of step with divine ordinance. According to God's command, each new morning would bring a supply of heavenly bread just

sufficient to supply the needs of the people for one day, except for on the sixth day, when a double portion would appear in order for there to be enough for the Sabbath.<sup>8</sup> However, when the bread did appear that first day, several of Israel ignored God’s instructions and greedily hoarded some of their manna overnight. As promised, “it bred worms and became foul,” and “Moses was angry with them.”<sup>9</sup> Disobedience occurred yet again when “on the seventh day some of the people went out to gather.”<sup>10</sup> Not only did the rebellious Israelites find the desert sands empty of manna, but they also garnered the exasperation of God:

The Lord said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The Lord has given you the Sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.”<sup>11</sup>

These divine words reveal an important principle which the people had twice failed to acknowledge: if God is faithful to His word once, He will surely be faithful to His promises in the future. The memory of that first morning when the evaporation of a layer of dew revealed miraculous daily bread had surely faded in the Israelite conscious when they could so self-servingly act as if God were a God of broken promises. Surely the main issue here was not the question of God sending manna, but the question of God fulfilling His covenant. The Israelites’ inability to trust the Lord with delivering bread revealed their inability to trust the Lord with delivering on His promise to Abraham.

The errant actions of our first parents and of Abraham’s offspring in the desert fit into a narrative in which creatures arrogantly eschew the overabundant providence of

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 16:4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 16:20.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 16:27.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 16: 28-29.



God and set themselves up as self-creating, self-sustaining, and self-redeeming. In this narrative, humans attempt to provide for themselves, reaching out and grasping for more than has been allowed or for that which has been prohibited. Improper eating is the physical manifestation of proud indifference to the abundant provision of God in both the material and spiritual realms. Eve ate of the apple, and it was a multi-layered transgression. Not only did her hand touch and her tongue taste and her stomach take the illicit fruit, but her soul strained towards a position higher than that for which she had been created. As queen of creation, she had nothing to gain and everything to lose, yet she arrogantly (and futilely) attempted to improve her situation. Likewise, when those disobedient of the Israelites tried to collect for themselves more manna than had been ordained, not only did they cross a material boundary, but they also strove to control their own destiny. Becoming impatient and assenting to the lie that God would abandon them to die in the desert without bringing His covenant to completion, they decided to do things their own way. In their proud disillusionment, they saw themselves as more capable of their salvation than the Lord God who had brought them up out of Egypt.

Thus, in the behaviors of improper eating, pride is deeply connected to distrust. The futile effort at an improved situation (often, simply a more satisfied palate or stomach) results from a lack of trust in a God who has never once proven unfaithful but whom we, duped by the accusing words of the serpent, suspect of infidelity nonetheless. Adam and Eve were not completely secure in the assurances of the God who had only proven to be benevolent and gracious (indeed, Eve's creation was out of pure love and concern for Adam's fulfillment), so they acted in a way which seemed to safeguard

themselves against divine infidelity. Tragically, of course, they, not He, were culpable of dishonesty and promise-breaking.

Furthermore, the agenda of wrong eating is one governed by individual impulse and the desire for autonomy, rather than one in which creatures submit to and order themselves according to the rhythm ordained by God, such as in the liturgy. For the creature trapped in these patterns, “I want more food,” speaks louder than “you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.”<sup>12</sup> Refusal to assent to the divinely-established order prevents that creature from participating fully in the life of God, which Christians hold is the highest calling of a person. Furthermore, by rejecting the divinely-ordained rhythms of the community of God’s people, one also acts in a highly individualistic and self-centered way, and risks dividing the community of believers. Eve’s selfish actions brought on a curse which “put enmity between” her and her husband; the Israelites’ attempted hoarding of the manna ignored any consideration of the communal good.<sup>13</sup> The act of selfish, incorrect eating and the selfless submission to the life of the whole are mutually exclusive behaviors.

So then, we see that where the liturgy tells a story of creatures who humbly trust in their Creator’s providence and who surrender to the divine order, habits of wrong eating are part of a narrative in which creatures act against the divine order and divide the community of believers with their distrustful attitude towards the God who creates, sustains, and saves. Rather than humbly acknowledging God’s character and action as proven throughout history, creatures who eat improperly engage in physical behaviors which reveal and stem from deeper spiritual issues of pride, distrust, and selfishness.

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<sup>12</sup> Exodus 16:12.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 3:15.

This pride may be overt, or the person engaged in wrong eating may be unconscious of it; however, no matter the intention, wrong eating fits into and builds up a narrative which tells the wrong story about God.

### *Over-Eating*

#### *The Deadly Sin of Gluttony*

The English word “gluttony” originates from the Latin word *gula*, meaning “throat”; this etymology graphically demonstrates exactly what physical vehicle early Christians perceived as responsible for the downfall of a soul guilty of gluttony.<sup>14</sup> The concept of gluttony as an improper human behavior was certainly understood by religious and philosophical people prior to the Christians. Indeed, one of the most defining characteristics of the Judaic law is its insistence on strict dietary observances; in an ancient Middle East given over to a thousand pagan idols, it was their particular diet which set apart the people of the one true God. Ancient philosophical types in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds recognized the ability of the stomach and other bodily passions to disrupt the journey of the soul and the intellect towards enlightenment, reason, and wisdom, and thus advised against over-feeding, and thus over-fueling, the appetite. Many humans seemed to innately realize that taking for oneself more food than was necessary or stuffing oneself to the point of unproductiveness and illness was somehow inappropriate.

However, the negative view towards gluttony was certainly not universal, and as Francine Prose notes, “the ways in which the sin has been viewed have evolved in

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<sup>14</sup> Francine Prose, *Gluttony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 52.

accordance with the changing obsessions of society and culture.”<sup>15</sup> Among the wealthy aristocracy of several cultures, plumpness implied a financial ability to over-consume, and thus was a status symbol.<sup>16</sup> In ancient Rome, the houses of the rich were equipped with *vomitoria* simply so that the guests of lavish parties would not be required to cease their enjoyment of the extravagant food items.<sup>17</sup> Even much later in history, in renaissance England, individuals with wide waistlines were considered far more beautiful; this, of course, was again because of the economic status associated with such a figure. In these cultures, gluttony “became almost a badge of pride” and a socioeconomic right: “Substance, weight, and the ability to afford the most lavish pleasures of the table became visible signs of vitality, prosperity, and...worldly success.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite some discrepancies between cultures on the moral status of gluttony, early Christians certainly categorized it as a vice, even among those most dangerous to one’s soul. Among the first to designate gluttony as a deadly sin was Gregory the Great, who gave one of the earliest articulations of the *septem principalia uitia* in his *Moralia*. He identified five excessive behaviors which could he believed could be classified as gluttony: “too soon, too delicately, too expensively, too greedily, too much.”<sup>19</sup> Following Gregory, many other theologians sought to articulate exactly what the particular dangers of gluttony were.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3, 24-6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7.

Many saw the indulgence of the stomach and the senses as a gateway to other, more dangerous kinds of sin; Christians especially recognized the capacity of a full stomach to fuel lustful feelings and actions. This attitude coheres with the general Christian belief that vices are not stand-alone; they ensnare and entrap humans to further and different vices. Prose relates the medieval Christian theory “that gluttony makes us let down our guard, weakens our moral defenses, and thus paves the way for lechery and debauchery.”<sup>20</sup> She also cites a popular medieval legend with a sharp, biting moral:

The hermit John of Beverley was tested by God, who sent an angel to force John to choose among three sins: drunkenness, rape, or murder. Sensibly, as anyone might, the hermit chose drunkenness. Or not so sensibly, as it would soon turn out, because, in his drunken insensate stupor, he raped and murdered his own sister.<sup>21</sup>

Even though a moralizing tale such as this one may seem a bit caricatured, early and medieval Christians were certainly close to the mark in recognizing a certain causal relationship between overly full stomachs and various kinds of mischief and vice.

Prose writes:

From the early Middle Ages until the early Renaissance...the principal danger of gluttony was thought to reside in its nature as a form of idolatry...a cult with rituals and demands that would inevitably divert and distract the faithful from true, authentic religion.<sup>22</sup>

As to any vice, “the first principal objection to gluttony is that [it] turns our attention from holy thing and becomes a substitute for the worship of God.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the grave danger of over-eating is the idolization of the wants of the body over the proper object of worship. The individual engaged in such behaviors is in peril of creating for himself a

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 13.

false religion in which he is “ultimately concerned” with satiating his desires.<sup>24</sup> This directly opposes the narrative of the liturgy, in which the benevolent and loving activity of God is of primary concern.

*Particularly Modern Manifestations of Over-Eating*

Francine Prose writes that “we have become a culture of gluttons,” and I most certainly agree with her.<sup>25</sup> However, in order to address this extensive and pervasive vice on both the individual and societal levels, we must identify its manifestation. Assume, as this thesis does, that the formative habits of the body do speak to the formation of the soul. What then, are the improper habits of over-eating which form us in modern times? To draw a one-to-one correlation with obesity or being overweight belies the complexity of the issue, though the ever-increasing collective weight of our society is perhaps the grimmest manifestation of this problematic relationship with food. The route of broadly equating fatness with sinfulness is a deceptively simple means of avoiding what is, quite frankly, a nearly impossible issue to satisfactorily reckon. In this next section, I will briefly discuss some of the modern manifestations of over-eating.

Mary Louise Bringle scoffs at the idea of “‘Christian weight control classes’ which advertise ‘God’s help in losing unwanted pounds,’” and she may not be entirely wrong to roll her eyes at well-meaning Christians who miss the point that weight and health and appearance are not the ultimate ends of human existence.<sup>26</sup> However, in her efforts to take readers past the cellulite and deeper into the soul of the individual, she may

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<sup>24</sup> Mary Louise Bringle, *The God of Thinness: Gluttony and Other Weighty Matters* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 27.

<sup>25</sup> Prose, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Bringle, 13.

make the mistake of throwing away bodily considerations all together. If the assertions of this thesis thus far hold true, then this simply cannot be the case, no matter how uncomfortable the tension may be. The body is a remarkable gift, and Christians certainly ought to work to treat it honorably and respectfully as means of pursuing a holistically understood well-being.

The sheer frequency of obesity in our culture is largely the result of a communal disregard for the nutritional worth, as well as the portion size, of the food which we consume on a daily basis. Prose cites a statistic from the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases that one-third of all Americans are overweight, 4. 7 million of which are children and adolescents.<sup>27</sup> With being overweight or obese, of course, comes a host of health complications, including diabetes and heart disease, and Prose cites that poor diet and inactivity can be credited with 350,000 deaths annually.<sup>28</sup> On some level, this widespread ability to eat ourselves to death (literally) flows out of the same dichotomy of matter and spirit just discussed. People see food choices as just that: mere choice, not something fraught with spiritual significance.

Of course, one must be cautious in correlating numbers on a scale with spiritual well-being. Two of the Church's dearest theologians (one medieval, one modern) were both of notoriously wide girth: St. Thomas Aquinas and G. K. Chesterton. Chesterton, who himself weighed in at three hundred and fifty pounds, wrote of St. Thomas's well-known substance:

His bulk made it easy to regard him humorously as a sort of walking wine-barrel, common in the comedies of so many nations; he joked about it himself. It may be

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<sup>27</sup> Prose, 77.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

that he...was responsible for the sublime exaggeration that a crescent was cut out of the dinner table to allow him to sit down.<sup>29</sup>

From our vantage point, it seems safe to say that the souls of these two spiritual champions were not in dire danger with respect to their Creator. However, their overall right standing with the Lord cannot be taken as an excuse for what may have been and could have become a matter of struggle with over-feeding the appetites. Whatever the case was for these two men (and others like them), we do well to remember that while appearances may tell a deeper story, they are rarely the whole story.

Indeed, Aquinas often sought to demonstrate that the manner of eating more than that which is eaten which truly demonstrates the state of the individual's soul. For support, he draws on Jesus' declaration that "what goes into our mouths cannot defile us, but what comes out of our mouths...certainly can."<sup>30</sup> According to Francine Prose, "Aquinas interprets this to mean that *nothing* we put in our mouths can defile us, so gluttony...cannot defile us either."<sup>31</sup> Rather, "the *inordinate desire* for food, a longing so powerful and thoroughly involving that it comes between us and God" gives rise to the true danger of the deadly sin of gluttony.<sup>32</sup> Prose remarks that this "notably soft line on gluttony" (meaning soft in relation to Aquinas's medieval contemporaries) "may have had something to do with" the saint's own apparent love of food and drink.<sup>33</sup> While this may have been the case, his argument certainly holds weight. Eight hundred years prior, St. Augustine of Hippo had articulated the same stance: that while partaking of some

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 38. Emphasis in original.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 38. Emphasis in original.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 38.



particular foods or amounts of food could certainly qualify as an act of gluttony, the more accurate limit between vice and virtue was the way in which the individual partook of that food. Prose, citing St. Augustine, writes:

John the Baptist's unusual dietary preference was nowhere near as reprehensible as the sin of the Hebrews, who, while wandering in the desert, committed the ultimate evil of being so concerned with their bellies that they turned away from God.<sup>34</sup>

If we assent to the ideas of these two theologians and their many followers in the Christian tradition, we will find that a man may greedily hoard stale crackers and canned tuna in a gluttonous manner, while another man who delights in the material miracle that is his wife's chocolate cake will not be culpable of the same. However, even while bearing this caveat in mind, one cannot deny that something seems terribly the matter with a society (such as modern America) so apparently given over to its collective appetite.

Another manifestation of over-eating which has become particularly accessible in the modern developed world, thanks to a widespread financial ability to over-purchase food, is the incorrect behavior of comfort, compulsive, or binge eating. Bringle, confessing to having personally struggled with this particular kind of over-eating, treats it extensively in the opening to her book. She speaks of the psychological struggle of the self-known compulsive eater: accusations against the self and cries for help "even when [one has] literally anaesthetized myself with carbohydrates."<sup>35</sup> For self-aware individuals such as Bringle, the reality of their own self-destructive habits is always evident before

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>35</sup> Bringle, 12.

them.<sup>36</sup> However, for many other less insightful people in modern society, the danger of such ways of relating to food remains unseen. For the Christian, though, peril to the soul should be apparent when food itself is invested with the emotional and mental burdens of individuals. It is once more a departure from the proper liturgical narrative by allowing something other than God to fill His right position.

One final practice of over-eating which is also pertinent to the modern, developed world is the habit of gourmandizing. In our world more than ever, foods from across the world, including things considered delicacies but a few decades ago, can be conveniently accessed, if not at local markets, then certainly in local restaurants. Prose points out the modern obsession with the gourmet, citing a cultural fixation “on identifying the trendiest restaurant and the newest exotic ingredient.”<sup>37</sup> While food is certainly a beautiful and aesthetically remarkable thing, epicures risk crossing the line of becoming obsessed with the sensory experience of eating. Their eating can devolve from the joyful abundance of the feast which points outward and upward to the glorious work of God to the ravenous pursuit of the latest and greatest food for that food’s sake. Such a eating narrative would no longer center on God the Creator and Provider.

Like all wrong eating, the particular practices of over-eating have the power to divide communities. In modernity, this divisive capacity has taken an ugly turn as so many of these behaviors—general overconsumption, compulsive or binge eating, gourmandizing—can be an arrogant and sinful enacting of social status, economic power, or both. In other words, modern over-eating can in some instances become a vehicle for the prideful dominance of those with more purchasing power over those with less. Of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>37</sup> Prose, 11.

course, instances of this vice occur in smaller communities, but it is especially offensive in the face of issues such as global hunger and poverty, social justice, and environmental sustainability—modern dilemmas all of which are deeply affected by the food industry. Furthermore, modern persons who engage in behaviors of over-eating are likely to isolate themselves from or divide their communities by embodying the individualistic, autonomous account of man given by modernity.

All of these modern manifestations of over-eating coalesce with the narrative of wrong eating just as much as their medieval forerunners did. It is a narrative of creatures standing in wrong relation to the divinely order in order to satiate their own desires, wants, or needs and of creatures distrusting the promises of God to provide for them all that they need. Even in cases where genetics and addiction come into play, there remains a sense that wrong over-eating is an instance of the human living which narrates an untrue story about God and His people.

#### *Under-eating or Not-eating*

Just as perilous a form of improper eating, but often less obvious than its gluttonous companion, is the problematic attitude towards food which manifests itself in under-eating or not-eating. The inherent danger of this form of wrong eating is in its shunning of the material realm as a good thing gifted by God to his creation. Some people engaged in these practices hold a rather unimaginative view of food as a merely utilitarian substance which keeps the body running day by day. Others take an even more severe outlook, able only to see food as an enemy—a calorie-laden foe which merely fattens and distorts the lines of an ideal body.

Once more, we find modern dualist sensibilities at the heart of this perception. The same dichotomy between physical and spiritual which permits the routine overconsumption of chocolate or coffee also allows the tragic reduction of that remarkable thing called food into a mere conglomeration of molecules which cause energy-producing reactions within the cells of human bodies. To individuals who see food through these kinds of lenses, the richer aspects of food lose their meaning. Food has the potential to be an extraordinarily beautiful and aesthetic experience through its taste, aroma, appearance, and texture; it can also bring pleasure and gratification through the work of preparing it and through the sharing of it with others. However, those struggling with under-eating or not-eating sadly miss these enjoyable aspects of food.

An even deeper exploration will show just how this particular form of wrong eating fits into the wider narrative framework established by practices of improper eating. Earlier in this chapter, I observed that three things characterize this incorrect narrative: pride, distrust, and a misguided sense of individualism. All three of these features are antithetical to the way in which the Christian liturgy teaches that creatures should react to the abundant providence of God, and all three are present in practices of under-eating and not-eating. Whether the individual who eats incorrectly is aware of it or not, his actions may testify to an account of himself and of God which is not in accord with the teachings of Christianity.

As defined earlier in the first chapter, pride is the disillusioned elevation of oneself to an undeservedly higher place with regard to fellow humans and with regard to God. It is a blasphemous action which insinuates that the world as God has created it is flawed and lacking. Perhaps the most obvious occurrence of pride within practices of

under- or not-eating is in the rejection of the material good of food which God has created for the benefit of humans. Beautiful, wondrous substances have been raised from the earth for the purposes of nourishment and enjoyment: lamb, onions, parsley, and glory of all glories, butter. How unfortunate is the person who shuns butter altogether simply because too much of a good thing tends to lead to poor health?

Besides being a proud spurning of food as a part of God's created gift, habits of eating too little or not at all also result from the arrogant rejection of the good of physical bodies. This is what Mary Louise Bringle terms "a new gnosticism":

Gnosticism...represents an attempt to achieve...salvation through a flight from the disgusting encumbrance of the physical body. It is easy to see how dietary fetishes illustrate a new gnosticism: repulsed by the onus of the flesh, of fatness, of our own frantic appetites, we turn to the salvation promised by the esoteric wisdom of the latest diet formula.<sup>38</sup>

In the name of an ideal of thin, modern society has set up an idol of thin, forgoing the ways in which bodies were made to function and thrive. Bringle cites many disturbing statistics regarding the phenomenon of the thin-craze; one of the most terrifying is that "fully two-thirds of adult women report in response to surveys that one of their greatest worries is over getting fat."<sup>39</sup> The latest and greatest diet seeks to control and coerce the body—which remember, according to modern dualism, is but a heap of physical elements. Though outwardly different than the particular strain of gnosticism which St. Augustine fought in his time, this is certainly in line with a gnostic ideology which refuses to identify any mental, rational, moral, or spiritual worth in the body. It is not difficult to despise one's body when it has been dislocated from matters of spiritual value.

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<sup>38</sup> Bringle, 23.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 25.

Unsurprisingly, the creaturely pride which under- or not-eating embodies is accompanied by a lack of trust in the abundant promises of God. By seizing the so-called right to his body in order to control and manipulate it to his liking, the under-eating individual demonstrates, intentionally or not, that he does not trust the established manner in which God has determined bodies should function healthily. He places more trust in the idol of thinness or fitness than in the true God of provision and creation.

Lastly, behaviors of under-eating or not-eating embody a selfish individualism which, though it is a perennial human problem, is typical of modernity. Society defines humans primarily as individuals, and secondarily as individuals which function within certain social and communal settings. The conception is of several balloons bumping around on a ceiling, sometimes clumping together when the air conditioner switches on, and then spreading out once more after the unit switches off. This is, of course, totally antithetical to the Christian conception of the person. Christianity teaches that God made humans to be relational: the second greatest commandment to loving God is love one's neighbors. Even more, the vehicle of redemption is through the Bride of Christ: the Church. Improper under-eating or not-eating, however, buys into the idea that choices about food, health, and exercise are the private property of the individual whose body they supposedly directly affect. Furthermore, habits of under- and not-eating often inhibit true community, as the individual is unable to properly engage in neither ordinary mealtimes nor (especially) in celebrations. Thus, we see that the person participating in practices of improper under-eating fails to fully and properly engage with various communities, having foregone part of his inherently social and relational nature in favor of individualistic alimentary decisions.

A peculiar incident in the history of Christianity deserves a brief mention before the conclusion of this section on improper under-eating or not-eating: the phenomenon of the so-called “holy anorexics.” From the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, many religious women approached “sanctity through feats of extraordinary food asceticism.”<sup>40</sup> These women, of whom one of the most well-known was St. Catherine of Siena, so distrusted the temptations of the flesh and so strove after the *imitatio Christi* that they fasted to the point of severe starvation. Furthermore, they participated in various mortifications such as “eating lice, maggots, and scabs or drinking water in which they [had] bathed the wounds of lepers.”<sup>41</sup> These severe actions, while pursued with good intentions, have often been censured for their extremity. Bringle cites St. Syncletice, a fourth-century desert teacher, on the dangers of excessive under-eating in the name of fasting:

The devil sometimes sends a severe fast, too prolonged...How do we distinguish the fasting of our God...from the fasting of that tyrant the devil? Clearly by its moderation...Everything which is extreme is destructive.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Bringle notes, “Extremes of underindulgence are...looked upon as severely by many patristic authors as are extremes of overindulgence.”<sup>43</sup> The phenomenon of holy anorexia is worth noting simply to demonstrate the myriad ways in which problematic eating can manifest itself. Bad under-eating is not strictly the Atkins Diet or *anorexia nervosa*. It is any under-eating or not-eating which, rather than humbly engaging in the divine narrative as does the fast, pursues selfish goods. Even when these goods seem to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

be in pursuit of the holy, they can become snares to be prideful and temptations to manipulate and dominate the physical element, diminishing it out of a gnostic fear and distrust of the created realm.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

In conclusion, it is helpful to revisit the words of Mary Louise Bringle which I cited in the conclusion to the second chapter: “The ways that I am in my body both ground and reflect the ways that I am in my spirit and in the world.”<sup>44</sup> Just as the eating practices of the liturgy have the power to shape the body and soul in a positive narrative about the truth of God and His creation, so are improper eating behaviors able to form the individual negatively towards a narrative of creaturely pride, arrogance, distrust, and disillusioned independence. Wrong eating occurs at the point where eating turns from something which centers on the grace and generosity of God and to something which manipulates food and bodies to satisfy individuals desires. Both poles of problematic modern eating—over-eating and under- or not-eating—embody this incorrect narrative in which humans are self-creating, self-sustaining, and self-saving, and utterly blind to their total dependence on God.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 16.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Final Reflections: Applying Liturgical Patterns of Proper Eating to Behaviors of Improper Eating

In the last three chapters, I have asserted three main points. First, according to an account of the human individual which is supported by the Christian tradition, the body and the soul are deeply connected, and the practices and habits of the body have profound influence on the state of the soul, and vice versa. This view directly opposes the commonly received modern ideology which sadly dichotomizes these two inseparable elements of the human person into two disparate entities which have little to do with one another. Particularly contrary to the Christian holistic view of the person is the modern conception of the physical body as having no spiritual significance at all, being nothing more than a collection of chemical and biological processes. By the Christian account, however, matters of the body are of deep importance to the spiritual health of the person—matters of food especially.

In light of a unified philosophy of the individual, I argued in the second chapter, along with many voices from the Christian tradition, that the Christian liturgy consists in exactly the kinds of embodied practices which orient the human soul to the proper narrative concerning a creating, providing, sustaining, and saving God. In particular, because a large part of the liturgical pattern consists in a steady sequence of fasts and feasts, the person so immersed in these rhythms of the church is likely to pursue attitudes towards food and eating which are rightly aligned with the proper narrative about God and His people. These two correct patterns of eating embody an inherently humble and

trusting spirit towards the abundant providence of the Creator, and this humility and dependence are patterned in the scriptural and liturgical narratives. By engaging in the special occasions of feasting and fasting and embracing the story which they relate, humans are able to engage in daily, ordinary eating in a way which is better ordered towards God.

Directly opposed to the proper Christian manners of relating to food are the two poles of problematic eating which especially afflict modern society: over-eating and under- or not-eating. While outwardly completely opposite, these two patterns of practices towards food both derive from the dualistic modern view of body and soul, an idea which allows participants in these behaviors to perceive the body as an object of manipulation and control. For those engaged in practices of over-eating, food may be treated simply as a means of fulfilling the appetitive impulses of the stomach or of serving as a cushion and comfort to areas of emotional lack, and the overconsumption of food often produces serious health issues, as the obesity epidemic in America clearly demonstrates. Rather than take in an amount which is sensible for bodily health and function and adequate to leave enough for others, yet for which the individual feels deep gratitude and in which he experiences the beauty of creation, he overfills again and again and again.

Those who practice habits of under- or not-eating, on the other hand, reject the good of the body and shun food as an enemy to so-called “beauty,” “fitness,” or “health.” The manifestations of this problematic attitude range from the devotee of the fad diet to the extreme sufferer of a clinical eating disorder. Slippery to define, the behaviors of under- or not-eating infect their participants with a gnostic abhorrence of the physical—a

tragic lack of regard for the divine work of creation which is perilous to both body and soul.

Both of these problematic patterns of relating to food and to bodies deeply oppose the inherent humility and gratitude of the liturgically formed attitude towards eating with a narrative marked by pride, arrogance, distrust, and disillusioned independence. Rather than humbly surrender to the terms and conditions, so to speak, of a God who benevolently gifts a remarkable creation to His image-bearers, those who struggle with habits of bad eating seize the gift as their own under the illusion that as the head of creation, they possess the tyrannical power and absolute right to manipulate and control it as they please. These people set themselves up as self-creating and self-sustaining; what is most terrible and offensive to the Christian is that illusions of self-creation and self-sustainment inevitably yield the most blasphemous deception of all: self-salvation. The bodily practices of those who eat too much, eat the wrong thing, eat too little, or eat not at all have the power to twist the souls of those individuals into souls unable to humbly or gratefully receive the grace of salvation through Christ.

The argument that people who eat the wrong way have a bad relationship with God likely seems a stretch, perhaps even a caricature, and rubs rough against many modern sensibilities. Even as this thesis was in progress, I often received comments similar to the following:

- So if I eat ice cream, I don't trust God?
- So fat people can't love God?
- So people who like food are bad Christians?
- I know plenty of skinny people who have healthy eating habits and still have terrible relationships with God.
- Are you going to judge me if I lose weight?

Tension certainly arises when the twenty-first century Christian attempts to construct a modern definition of over-eating or gluttony along the lines of the scriptural paradigms already discussed. Many efforts to do so come off strained and artificial: “I shouldn’t eat this cupcake, because that would mean I’m failing to trust in God’s love for me.” Our modern discomfort with correlating the habits of our stomach and the habits of our soul quite probably stems from the dualistic philosophy of body and spirit which prevails in our culture and which was discussed in the first chapter. Because we cannot imagine that the actions of the body have much at all to do with the ordering of the soul, we fail to appreciate the potential of food as a means of more purely ordering our souls. However, this thesis has attempted to demonstrate the deep need for Christians to be deeply attentive to their practices of eating, even and especially in the face of modern discomfort with such a study.

It now remains to demonstrate how, if my argument holds true, a twenty-first century Christian, particularly one living in the developed world, ought to adjust and form his habits and practices of eating in order for his soul to be ever better ordered towards God. In this final chapter, I will demonstrate how the proper forms of eating discussed in the second chapter serve as correctives for the practices of bad eating covered in the third chapter. Being those things which habits of improper eating twist and pervert, they are also those things most suited to bring these privations back into proper alignment. Thus, this chapter will be concerned with so-called “practical matters”—how to take truths about bodies and souls and good eating and bad eating, and make them into some sort of livable pattern. By way of example, I will seek to apply my formulations to the film *Babette’s Feast*, critiquing it in light of my argument regarding

proper Christian eating. As a whole, this chapter will aim to focus very much on issues of application, some of which are informed by personal observation and experience.

*Bodily Practices and a Bit on the Nature of Virtue and Vice*

The foundation of this thesis has been the assertion that a Christian view of the human individual unites the too-often dichotomized elements of body and soul. Under this holistic conception of the person, the state and actions of the physical body, while secondary to the state and actions of the soul as it moves toward or away from God, are crucial to that health and movement of the spiritual element. The body cannot be rejected as a mere physical entity without significance to or influence on the spiritual health of the individual. Quite the opposite: as embodied souls, the human lives his life in and through his body; there is no experience he has without it. As such, the physical aspect of the individual cannot be disregarded in the Christian notion of the human creature's movement toward its Creator. The practices and habits of the body both construct and reflect the narrative framework under which the individual operates physically, morally, and spiritually.

From the recognition of the power of bodily practices and habits comes my central argument: that matters of food and eating are of deep significance to the spiritual growth (or alternatively, decay) of the individual. Little else is more central to human existence than the practice of eating. Day after day, we engage in this critical ritual of nourishment; we cannot survive without it. Problems arise, however, with the potential contained within material things—food included—for temptation and corruption. How are we to manage this substance which has the power either to warm our spirits towards greater love of God or to burn us with entangling vice? It is handling fire, indeed.

Christianity gives its answer to this difficult and imposing question through the liturgy—a set of embodied practices formed from the narrative of Scripture and the tradition of the Church. As discussed in the second chapter, its practices of eating and attitudes towards food are a central and defining feature of the liturgy. The Christian calendar, on both an annual and weekly basis, cycles between two intentional eating behaviors: fasting and feasting. Both of these practices, though outwardly different, embody the same scriptural narrative in which creatures respond humbly and with gratitude and trust to a loving and gracious God who creates, sustains, preserves, and saves. The ultimate goal of all liturgical activity is to point towards the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—His incarnation, life, death, and resurrection which cleanse the sin of the world—and to form people by that Gospel mold. This aligns with the proper end of *all* human activity: the love of the Trinity.

Unfortunately, humans are unable to pursue a liturgical life in a vacuum. Distraction and temptation in the world beckon at every turn, and thanks to the fall, the blight of original sin can infect even the best efforts toward virtuous living. Thus, it must be considered not simply *what* the liturgical narrative of proper eating is, but *how* it speaks into the improper eating which pervades society and individual lives. What exactly happens at the intersection of the disease and its cure?

As mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, the Christian conception of sin is as *privatio boni*, meaning that it is but a twisting of the good which has no real existence of its own. Vice depends solely on the virtue which it perverts for being, leeching existence like a parasite off of the good, without which it would have no model or inspiration, so to speak, for itself. By this logic, the good in the world necessarily preexists the bad in the

world, even in a much deeper sense than chronologically. Good, being intrinsic to the life of God, possesses the truest reality. Evil, on the other hand, *began*, and furthermore, has only a parasitical existence to claim for its own.

Thus, we can assert that bad eating simply perverts some better eating which it parrots. Without the good of fruit in creation—its delightful aroma, its sweet and pleasing taste, its glossy and beautiful appearance—the serpent in the garden would have had no material to work with when it came to tempting Eve. The evil to which he prompted her required some good thing to imitate, some golden veil to costume its ugly blackness, or else temptation would have been no temptation at all. Likewise, without the good of the proper fast, the temptation of the holy anorexics to push their religious practices to the extreme would not have been a convincing one; it needed the guise of sanctification in order to find acceptance in the abbeys.

Examples of this pattern—bad eating leeching existence off of good eating—also abound in modern times. The practice of overindulging and over-consuming during Christmas to the point of neglecting the true wonder of the Nativity, as well as forgetting the four-week fast of Advent which precedes it, perverts the proper liturgical feast. The holiday is certainly a time for rejoicing and enjoying the fruits of creation, but vice tempts us to the extreme. On the other end of the spectrum, improper dieting and concern for one's figure and fitness terribly twist the good of being concerned with health and well-being. This instance of *privatio boni* is particularly perverted: one kind of inappropriate relationship with food (under-eating) masks itself as the cure of another type of improper eating (gluttony or over-eating).

If patterns of good eating preexist patterns of bad eating in more than just a chronological manner (i.e. Adam and Eve ate well in Eden before they ate poorly), then the correction of improper eating seems to lie in restoring order and alignment and in renewing both the communal and individual attitudes toward food. Thus, we arrive back at the importance of the liturgy; in being a set of embodied practices, the liturgy has the power to reorder and realign the soul more properly towards God. Indeed, the words “reorder” and “realign” connote physical direction and movement, and it makes perfect sense to correct the spiritual disorder which improper bodily practices cause with embodied habits and behaviors which tell a restorative narrative.

*Feast while the Bridegroom Is among You*

Being that good which is perverted by wrong behaviors of over-eating, the liturgical feast possesses the capacity to serve as a corrective for these improper habits. The creaturely humility which characterizes the narrative of the feast (and of the whole liturgy) counters the undergirding pride of over-eating which asserts appetitive desires over creation, manipulating food in order to satisfy selfish wants. Furthermore, habits of over-eating disregard the boundaries of health and wellness, a motion of rejecting the remarkable gift of the body.

In contrast, proper feasting compels a humble attitude with which these manifestations of sinful pride cannot coexist. The individual engaged in proper feasting recognizes that food is a created gift from God which is aesthetically pleasing, nourishing to the body, and a channel for fellowship and community, and he humbly accepts this gift as something for which he is entirely dependent upon the benevolence of God. Feasting embodies the attitude of Timothy when he writes that “we brought nothing into the



world, so that we can take nothing out of it.”<sup>1</sup> The gratitude and humility of liturgical feasting serve to reorder the thanklessness of over-eating. Subsequently, this realignment trains the individual past thankfulness for food and into a deep gratitude and humble acceptance of the grace of redemption which God provides through the work and worth of Christ.

Furthermore, the intrinsic trust and dependence of the narrative of liturgical feasting solves the problem of the distrust and skepticism which manifest themselves in habits of over-eating. The lack of trust in material providence which underlies habits of incorrect over-eating can translate into a deep distrust in spiritual providence; just as the Israelites in the wilderness doubted the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, so do we doubt the God’s completion of His covenant work in us through Christ. However, a feast mentality, rather than a gluttony mentality, approaches food in such a way as to dispel fear and anxiety, either about material things or spiritual things. The festal narrative proclaims the unwavering faithfulness of God to His many promises throughout history, from feeding His people to redeeming them from sin. Through the trust and dependence which is enacted in liturgical feasting, the soul which finds trust a difficult thing to achieve can be reordered.

Lastly, the liturgical feast promotes fellowship and community in a way which corrects and reorders the divisive nature of over-eating behaviors. The promises of God, while certainly made to individuals, are made to individuals within the larger context of a people of God. In the Old Testament, this is the people of Israel; in the New, the boundaries are widened to include both Gentiles and Jews, and this new nation becomes the Church—the Body of Christ. Thus, the narrative of God’s redemptive covenant

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<sup>1</sup> I Timothy 6:7.

should be enacted via practices which the entire Body shares. The liturgy is just that: a pattern of behaviors in which the entire assembly of God's people participates in order to form their collective life, and thus their individual lives, better after the divine life. The feast, especially, is an inherently communal act. What sound soul has ever deeply wished to eat Christmas dinner in solitude? Festal activities are meant to be shared with fellow creatures; each graciously passed dish has the power to symbolically proclaim the goodness of the Lord's providence to a sister or a brother.

In addition to correcting the behaviors of over-eating which twist its plenteous character into profuse overindulgence, feasting also can make well the problematic attitudes of under- and not-eating. If behaviors of under-eating embody a rejection of the wonderful food with which God has graced creation and of the unique ability and impulse to eat and prepare food which He has instilled in humans, then the feast corrects this with its humble embrace of food in particular and creation in general. Imagine an individual who has come to dislike, or at least to sincerely claim and believe that he dislikes, the taste of truly delicious things only because of their relatively high calorie count. Surely, a proper notion of the liturgical feast could work wonders on this person's conception of food. It is not the enemy: it does not have single-minded and malicious agenda to fatten. Rather, it is gifted to humans to use wisely and reasonably, and to delight in and enjoy in such a manner as brings them towards deeper love of and gratitude towards God.

Again, the community-centered nature of the practice of feasting serves also to remedy the often divisive quality of under- or not-eating. Some individuals engaged in under-eating may not be able to properly share in meals (whether everyday or festal) because of their inability to reasonably consume and enjoy the spread before them.

Furthermore, the obsession with slimness which often accompanies under-eating or not-eating can also be highly divisive of community by leading to competition and jealousy, as well as to a culture of valuing people more for the shape of their bodies. The enjoyment of the feast can balance this extremely individualistic behavior, making even the most ordinary meal an occasion for gratitude and sharing.

The conception of the Christian feast culminates in the Eucharist, and the corrective effects of the feast just mentioned can all be found in the faithful consumption of the Eucharistic elements. Being the centerpiece of the Christian liturgy, this meal of bread and wine necessarily coalesces with the liturgical narrative about God and His creation: that His love is creating, sustaining and saving and that His creatures ought to respond to his love in particular manner. Indeed, the Eucharist proclaims the pinnacle of God's creation, providence, and salvation by reenacting the blessed sacrifice of Jesus Christ. By properly engaging in this meal of bread and wine, humans learn this proper response to God: humility, trust, dependence, and gratitude.

Ben Quash notes that the Eucharistic liturgy “stresses that fact that bread and wine are...the product of human labors *in the context of God's gracious provision.*”<sup>2</sup> Christians eating the bread and the wine understand that their consumption of these elements completely depends on the creative, artistic work of God in creating an edible creation. This truth of mankind's utter reliance on God for the nourishing fruits of the Earth directs the attention of the believer towards the truth of mankind's utter reliance on God for the nourishing body and sustaining blood of Christ's sacrifice; just as humans

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Quash, “Offering: Treasuring the Creation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 311. Emphasis added.

must take their daily bread from the Lord, so too must they take the Bread of Life and their redemption from sin from the Lord. This realization requires an attitude of humility and gratitude from the participant.

Furthermore, by naming all of creation as gift, the Eucharist as a feast helps realign the problematic practices of over-eating and under-eating. Quash quotes the Eucharistic liturgy from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* of 1662, which requires congregants to proclaim a blessing on the “Lord God of all creation, through [whose] goodness [they] have this bread...and wine to offer.”<sup>3</sup> As Quash sees it, “the overriding emphasis is that [the Eucharistic elements]...are God’s blessings, and it is by his relation to them (not our manipulation of them) that they bring life.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Eucharist can rectify both extremes of improper eating by molding its participants into a narrative in which food and bodies are not for manipulating and controlling, but rather are created things which are a part of the entire creation’s “motion toward what the world becomes in Christ.”<sup>5</sup> The proper telos of all things, including the liturgy, is Christ, Christ, and again, Christ.

The primary focus of the liturgy of the Eucharistic feast “is never on the objects...in their own right, but on the subject of this giving and receiving”: God.<sup>6</sup> Whereas individuals who participate in behaviors of improper eating eat food for the sake of the food itself or for the sake of some other inordinate object like bodily attractiveness, the Eucharist necessitates a type of eating which transcends the elements of the table to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 311.

point to the true story about God and His people. Thus, eating which is informed by the Eucharist has the power to correct forms of improper eating by forming individuals and communities to view their food as a gift which points to the goodness of its Giver—especially His goodness in providing a plan of redemption for fallen mankind.

Joel Shuman and Brian Volck write: “As humans are created male and female in God’s image...Christians understand all humanity as necessarily related, first to God as creature to Creator, then to each other as fellow creatures, and finally to the remainder of the creation, in which we delight and upon which we depend for our very lives.”<sup>7</sup> The power of the feast is to shape its participants into people who properly relate to God, to other humans, and to the rest of creation—especially food—in a way which harmonizes with the narrative of God’s providence and redemption of creation through His Son.

### *The Restorative Repentance of Fasting*

Just as its liturgical companion, feasting, has the power to embody a particular narrative which can correct behaviors of improper eating, so too can fasting help to realign disordered relationships towards food. Also like the feast, the proper, liturgy-formed fast has the capability of reordering both poles of wrong eating: over-eating and under- or not-eating. Firstly, by virtue of being that good which improper under-eating perverts, fasting has the power to redeem this particular kind of bad eating. The individual engaged in a proper fast will be immersed in an act of deep humility. This humility directly opposes the prideful rejection of body and food which behaviors of under-eating embody by gratefully welcoming a purifying lack of food which makes holy the soul. Whereas improper under-eating or not-eating are means of pursuing some good

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<sup>7</sup> Joel Shuman and Brian Volck, *Reclaiming the Body: Christians and the Faithful Use of Modern Medicine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 44.

which is strictly worldly (most often reduced weight), proper fasting is the abstinence from food for the ultimate sake of sanctifying the soul and bringing it closer to love of God. Because the fast focuses outward while under-eating selfishly looks inward, the narrative of the fast, which proclaims the absolute goodness of God rather than the goodness of a supposedly ideal human figure, has the power to correct behaviors of under-eating with a perspective shift.

Also, the proper fast is rooted in deep trust of and dependence on God, while under-eating and not-eating reflect distrust and disillusioned independence. Again, by refocusing persons given over to under-eating or not-eating towards the steadfast faithfulness of God to His promises, the fast teaches a lesson of trust. Just like the Hebrews in the desert easily became afraid that God would abandon His covenant to them and leave them in the desert to die, “Christians can easily lose focus on their hope for God’s kingdom.”<sup>8</sup> For McKnight, the solution to this distrust is the bodily fast, which educates the body and the soul to hope and wait for Christ. Time and time again, the Lord has made promises to His people “to give [them] a future with hope,” establishing a covenant relationship with them the ultimate purpose of which was to bring Himself glory by redeeming a fallen creation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the one who fasts as a part of a community aligns himself with the promise for good extended to God’s people, and the fast trains its participants into a narrative which requires them to depend time and time again on God for their salvation. This habitual trust is entirely antithetical to the illusion of independence which under-eating and not-eating embody through attempts to control and manipulate the body.

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<sup>8</sup> Scot McKnight, *Fasting* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 129.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 29:11.

As mentioned in the previous section, the habits of under-eating and not-eating tend to be quite divisive and individualistic. However, the proper fast is something which encourages community and fellowship. This is primarily, of course, because the liturgy is something which individuals participate in only in the context of the entire Church. Furthermore, as just noted, the narrative of fasting deals with promises intended for God's people as a whole. Because the fast is focused on the work of God in history, rather than on individuals' perceptions of theirs and others' bodies, community is drawn together by fasting practices rather than split apart.

### *Proper Christian Eating in the Ordinary*

As has been mentioned already, liturgical feasts and fasts are special, or extraordinary, times in the Church calendar. Neither could be well-sustained forever, and in some ways, the human condition on this side of the new Kingdom seems to require that we always must come out of the special feast or the special fast and return to the tension of the everyday: ordinary time. Not every earthly meal can be a Christmas feast, nor ought every meal be foregone in the hunger of the fast. Even the Eucharist is a special occurrence. This reality leaves the concerned Christian with many questions. How much do these mundane and routine practices actually need spiritual restoration? Is it even possible for such lofty practices as the feast and fast to truly transform the way in which we eat the average breakfast, lunch, and dinner? What do we do on the ordinary day, when we come to the ordinary table to sit and consume the ordinary meal?

This thesis has, of course, argued that the ordinary matters deeply for the Christian concerned with holistically ordering himself towards God. In some instances, perhaps, the ordinary is of greater consequence than the extraordinary, as these daily

habits are more intimately tied to who we truly are. I have argued that problematic attitudes and behaviors that occur on a regular basis are likely rooted somewhere in the soul, in a place where the soul poorly aligns with the true narrative about God and His creation. Thus, it is not a stretch to perceive a link between the special liturgical practices of feasting and fasting and the ordinary practices of eating when the liturgy is exactly what the Church employs to affect matters of spiritual disorder which manifest themselves in problematic thought and deed. Despite how they may seem to rub against modern sensibilities, feasts and fasts are what the Church has ordained its flock ought to practice with regard to eating. In liturgical eating, the Church has required the faithful to do exactly what we sometimes find incredulous: to live and grow where our food and our salvation intersect. This kind of living is nothing short of incarnational.

The feast and the fast, though special occasions, have everything to do with ordinary occasions because the story of God and His people which they both consistently narrate is a story which never ceases to be true, even when the spectrum of special liturgical hues—gray, violet, black, white, gold, and red—gives way to the simplicity of ordinary time. Through its rich spread and abundant provisions, the Easter feast proclaims that God is Creator, Sustainer, Provider, and Savior and that His creatures ought to respond to Him with humble gratitude and trusting dependence. Through its pangs of hunger and longing for food, the Lenten fast proclaims exactly the same. If these kinds of actions are capable of relating truths about God, then certainly more ordinary actions have this potential as well. After all, does it seem that Christians could be thwarted in discovering opportunities to proclaim the Gospel truth of God in every moment of every day? It seems to me that we certainly ought to seek out ways to live in



and through our citizenship in the Kingdom of God even during the consumption of a quick sandwich for lunch. God created the practice of and the need for eating; eating may certainly point towards its Creator.

Christ taught us to pray for daily bread. He also taught us that man does not live on bread alone. Holding these two truths in tension can help us to understand how to better eat to the glory of God. Likely every faithful Christian can order his eating more properly towards God. Whether this means correcting practices of over-eating or of under- or not-eating, the Christian can find the narrative capable of restoring either embodied in the cycle of the liturgy. The austere eater of diet bars and protein shakes will likely find that the feast educates him in how to more purely bless his body and his food. The routine consumer of excessive fast food may discover that the fast trains him to consume more intentionally and with greater respect for the health of his body. In both cases, the people who seek restoration from the liturgy will find that turning their eyes towards the material and spiritual provisions of God may transform mealtimes into occasions for the soul to grow towards its Maker.

These sorts of practices are certainly not always (if ever) convenient or comfortable. However, this does not constitute a valid reason for turning away from them and continuing to eat our daily bread with relative indifference towards its spiritual significance. Indeed, Christians are called towards a hard life of intentional *looking at* things—intentionally examining them and living in them as best as possible.

Convenience and comfort are not goods promised to the faithful; we are called to a difficult and lifelong task of embodied faith. Christians ought to eat *like* Christians, giving attention to how their manner of eating and of relating to food both reflects and

affects what they believe to be true about God and about themselves. The feast and the fast can shape the believer into an individual more attentive to the presence of Gospel truth in everyday objects and actions. While these two extraordinary practices of the Church do not constitute the bulk of the average Christian life, engaging in them and understanding the narrative which they embody can lead one to eat more thoughtfully and reflectively and in a way which makes space for the soul to continue its journey towards love of God.

### *Final Reflections*

Among other factors, two personal experiences in particular inspired, formed, and motivated this thesis. The first is a deep love of and appreciation for the beauty of that remarkable miracle called food. I owe this to my parents, whose own love for cooking and eating and sharing good food contributed to my sense that food is a miraculous thing—a grace given by God which allows us to deeply experience His love for beauty and His great artistry in creation. My parents balance their love of food with a balanced approach to health and well-being, and perhaps most importantly of all, their art in the kitchen is always an outpouring of love for each other, for my sister and me, and for their wider family and community. I have gratefully inherited their passion for cooking, and delight on a regular basis in such culinary wonders as chopping up red cabbage, sautéing garlic, and whipping heavy cream. Even more, I delight in sharing my love for food with others, seeking to nourish the soul as much as the body whenever I prepare food for those whom I love. My life is indelibly marked with a keen awareness of and gratitude for God's beautiful gift of food.

The second, and sadder, experience consists in the far too numerous interactions I have had during my college years with young women who obsess over food to the point of hating it, being unable to eat even a chocolate chip cookie without feeling shame and the deep need to make an excuse for their behavior. Consider the chocolate chip cookie. Does it not border on the miraculous? Flour, sugar, butter, eggs, vanilla, baking soda, and of course, chocolate are each a marvelous demonstration of God's creativity in constructing such a delightfully edible creation. But then, combined and baked to golden brown perfection (what genius must have moved that first human to dream up the cookie!), they come together in a harmony poignant enough to cause anyone to smile. That is, of course, unless you are someone who fears cookies because of their ability to round out a waistline when over-consumed. I have sadly known people to disallow themselves to enjoy things with comparatively high amounts of calories, simply because they cannot relish the taste of a food which they believe to be "bad for them." How could anything which testifies the glory of a creative and gracious God be bad for anyone?

With these two very disparate experiences intersecting in my life, I have often wondered how exactly we ought to view and eat our food—specifically, how we *Christians* ought to view and eat our food. My heart has broken for the fearers of food, and I had sometimes speculated whether or not something was the matter within these individuals' hearts more than just a desire to become or to remain thin. From where in the soul did this awful anxiety regarding calories and weight and body mass index actually originate? Add in the well-known cultural struggle with poor eating, obesity, and ever-increasing occurrences of diabetes and heart disease, and my simple musings about food had suddenly become a full-blown study into the nature of the food-soul

relationship. Whether the young woman unable to savor a truly delicious dessert or the already-overweight toddler wobbling behind his obese parents in the grocery store, instances of bad eating are seemingly everywhere. I feel deeply that our society is pervaded with seriously misguided conceptions of what it means to be a human with both a soul and a body—a body which cannot survive without food.

Being a Christian, I consider the teachings of Scripture and the Church authoritative things related to body and soul and being human, so to them I turned for the answers to these pressing questions. Early on in my inquiry, it became quite apparent that while practices of eating certainly possessed a deep connection to matters of the soul's health and order, clear-cut connections and distinctions were difficult to make. Things were not as simple as saying that eating too much was bad and that eating too little was also bad, nor was it easy (or right) to say that overweight people were evil and so were the skinny people. Also difficult to answer were the sometimes skeptical responses to my inquiry, because honestly, how often do people ingrained in practices of either over-eating or under-eating actually consider their actions to be arrogant rejections of the divine order? The answer is "quite rarely," and as I discovered this fact, it became quite necessary to adopt an intentional subtlety as I continued my study. I was finding, as had St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas centuries before me, that something about the sin of wrong eating had a lot more to do with *why* and *how* and *when* a person did or did not eat something than exactly *what* they were eating. In his *On Christian Doctrine*, St. Augustine writes:

It is not the use of the things but the desire of the user which is culpable. [...] Careful attention is therefore to be paid to what is proper to places, times, and persons lest we condemn the shameful too hastily. It may be that a wise man may use the most precious food without any vice of ardor or voraciousness, but a fool

may glow with the most filthy flame of gluttony before the vilest food. [...] For in all things of this kind we are to be commended or reprimanded, not because of the nature of the things which we use, but because of the motive in using them and the way in which they are desired.<sup>10</sup>

The cure for bad eating, then is not to stop eating ice cream and to only eat salads: such a surface-level remedy would simply carry us to the other pole of under-eating. Prose notes that “the specter of gluttony was never meant to prevent the faithful from eating.”<sup>11</sup> Gluttony, while certainly consisting in Gregory the Great’s classic definition of “too soon, too delicately, too expensively, too greedily, too much” must be considered in terms of the standard to which the five-fold *too* is relative. The *too*, that tiny word denoting an amount or a manner or a type past some line in the sand of acceptability, relates to the point at which practices of eating turn one away from ever-increasing love of the Triune God and towards a selfish, individualistic attitude: the point when the narrative changes from “the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” to “the God who brought us out to the desert to die.”<sup>12</sup>

If wrong eating begins at the moment when habits and actions begin to train the soul in the wrong narrative about God, then the proper corrective is in something which can realign the soul to the proper narrative. This is exactly the function of the Christian liturgy, which involves the Church in practices which embody the true narrative of God: that He is a benevolent and gracious Creator who sustains and saves His creation, and that we, His creatures, ought to respond to His love and abundance with humility, gratitude, trust, and dependence. Thus, by immersing oneself in the liturgical mindset, an

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<sup>10</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, translated by D. W. Robertson, Jr (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1958), 90-1.

<sup>11</sup> Francine Prose, *Gluttony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 40.

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 20:3; Cf. Exodus 16:3.

individual struggling with improper attitudes towards food may realign his soul to respond more correctly towards the providence of God. By the same token, a society (such as modern America) generally given over to both extremes of bad eating may find restoration in a life oriented towards the work of God in creation, rather than towards impulses and desires.

This thesis has been a humble beginning at exploring the nature of the relationship between the body and the soul and of the ability of the life of the Church to speak into that relationship. I believe that an individual's Christian faith can and ought to distinguish his choices apart from secular lifestyles in all instances. When eating is one of the most common (and absolutely necessary) activities of *any* human, and when the modern world seems ridden with food-related vice, it becomes critical to discern how the Christian should eat his daily bread differently than his secular neighbor. Indeed, both are provided for by the common grace of God which causes food to come up from the earth, and both have the opportunity to accept the saving grace of God. However, the manner in which they take that provision is perhaps one of the most tangible and telling indicators of whether or not the narrative of God governs their lives. When humans can accept literal bread and literal wine with humble and grateful and trusting hearts, this trains them to accept eternal bread and wine with humble and grateful and trusting hearts.

Rejecting God's grace of food gets us in the habit of rejecting God's grace of salvation, but accepting God's grace of daily bread trains us to become ever better at accepting God's grace of the Bread of Life.

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